Three Days of Happiness
Sugaru Miaki

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Sugaru Miaki

Illustration by E9L

YEN ON

New York

Copyright

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Sugaru Miaki

Translation by Stephen Paul
Cover art by E9L

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Yen Newsletter

1.

A Promise in Ten Years

When I first heard about the idea of buying and selling your life span, it reminded me of a lecture on morals from elementary school. Our teacher, a woman in her late twenties, posed a stark question to her class full of ten-year-olds who didn't yet know how to think for themselves.

"Now, children, human life is considered to be the most valuable thing of all, completely irreplaceable. If you were to put that in an actual monetary amount, how much do you think it would be?"

She paused and made a face at her own question. Apparently, that had been an inadequate way to phrase it. She faced the blackboard, chalk in hand, and froze for a good twenty seconds.

During this time, the class gravely considered their answers to the question. The majority of the students liked our young and pretty teacher and wanted to get the right answer to make her happy and win her praise.

One smarty-pants offered an answer.

"The lifetime earnings of a Japanese salaryman is around two or three hundred million yen, according to a book I read. That should be about right for the average person."

Half of the class looked impressed. The other half looked annoyed.

Nearly all the students in the class hated that smarty-pants.

"Well, that is true," said the teacher with a grimace. "I think most adults would give you the same answer. Calculating the worth of a person as the amount of money they make in their lifetime is one way to derive an answer. But I want you to put aside that way of thinking for now… How about this? I'll make an analogy. Another one of my tricky thought experiments."

Nobody could tell exactly what she had drawn on the blackboard with blue chalk. It looked vaguely like a person, but it also looked like a piece of gum stuck to the road.

But that was her intention.

"This strange, unidentifiable *something* has an infinite supply of money. The *something* is seeking to lead a human life. So what it wants to do is buy someone's life from them. And one day, you just so happen to cross paths

with the *something*. It asks you, 'Hey, would you sell me the life you're about to lead?'"

The teacher paused there.

"What happens if you sell it?" asked a very serious boy, raising his hand.

"You'd die, I suppose," she said matter-of-factly. "Which is why you'll initially turn down the request. But the *something* is persistent. 'Just half, then. You have sixty more years ahead. Will you sell me thirty of them? You see, I really need them,' it says."

At the time, I sat there with my fist propping up my cheek, thinking, *Ah, I get it*. I could sell that much. A shorter but richer life (within reason) was better than a longer but meager one, of course.

"But here's the problem. How much per year will this mysterious buyer pay you for your life span? And let me tell you first—there is no right answer. I just want to know what you think about this and what your answer is. Now, turn to the people sitting near you and discuss."

The classroom began to buzz with conversation.

But I did not take part. More accurately, I couldn't.

Because like the smarty-pants who brought up lifetime earnings earlier, I was considered something of a class pariah.

Instead, I pretended not to be interested in the discussion and waited for the time to pass.

I heard the people in the seats ahead of me saying, "If an entire life is worth three hundred million yen, then…"

Well, if they're worth three hundred million, I thought, *then I should be worth three billion.*

I don't remember the actual consensus of the discussion, just that it was pointless from start to finish. For one thing, the subject was far too complex for elementary school children to break down. Who knows if you could even get productive discourse out of a group of high schoolers?

I do distinctly remember a passionate argument from a girl who had no future, as far as I could tell, that "you can't put a price on human life." *Sure, if I had a life like hers, I wouldn't put a price on it, either. I'd probably have to sell it at a loss.*

Every class has some witty clown, and he was on the same train of thought as me. "If I sold you the right to have my life, you wouldn't even pay three hundred yen, would you?" he said, to hearty laughs. I agreed with the sentiment, but of course, he was only being sarcastically self-effacing for laughs and attention. He clearly considered himself to be far more valuable to the group than the boring, serious students—a fact I found detestable.

However, although the teacher told us there was no right answer, in fact, there *was*. Ten years later, when I turned twenty, I actually did sell my future life span and received something of value in return.

When I was a kid, I thought I would grow up to be someone important. I believed I was exceedingly special compared with my peers. Unfortunately, because my neighborhood was filled with extremely unimpressive parents who gave birth to many extremely unimpressive children, that misconception only grew over time.

I looked down on the children around me. I wasn't clever or humble enough to hide my overbearing pride, and my classmates shunned me for it. They excluded me from their cliques and often hid my belongings when I wasn't looking.

I got full marks on my tests all the time, but I wasn't the only one.

The other person who did was the aforementioned "smarty-pants," a girl named Himeno.

Because of her, I couldn't truly be the best, and because of me, she couldn't truly be the best. On the surface, I think, we were always bickering. All we thought about was trying to outdo the other.

But at the same time, we were also the only people either of us could really talk to. She was the only one who would accept what I said without misunderstanding it, and I was probably the same thing to her.

In the end, we always wound up together.

Even before that, our houses were across the street from each other, so we spent a lot of time together as kids. I suppose you could call us something like childhood friends. Our parents got along, and until we started going to school, when my parents were busy, Himeno's parents would watch me at their house, and when her parents were busy, Himeno came over to our house.

We saw each other as competitive rivals but had a tacit understanding that we would play nicely together in front of our parents. Not for any particular reason. It just seemed like a good idea. We might have kicked shins and pinched thighs under the table, but whenever the adults were watching, we were like close friends.

I suppose it's possible we really were.

For reasons much like my own, Himeno was despised by the rest of the class. She thought she was smart, sniffed at the people around her, and made no attempt to hide it. So she was shunned by everyone else.

Our houses were near the top of a hill, a good distance away from where the rest of our classmates lived. That was convenient for us; we could use the distance as an excuse not to hang out at their houses, and we rationalized staying at home instead. If we really got that bored, we could visit each other and play while we pretended we were there under duress.

On summer festival days and Christmas, we would go out and kill time on our own so as not to trouble our parents needlessly, and on family recreation days and open house days at school when our parents could come and watch the class, we pretended to be good friends. It was as if we were saying, "It's easiest for us to be together, so we choose to be like this." Rather than beg our inferior classmates to let us join their groups, we much preferred the company of our frenemy.

Elementary school was a depressing place for us. The other kids would keep pranking and harassing Himeno and me, which prompted class assemblies.

The teacher in charge of our class from fourth through sixth grade understood how this sort of thing went, and unless it was really bad, she was considerate enough not to inform our parents. After all, if they knew we were bullied, that would only make it worse. The teacher knew we needed to have at least *one* place where we could rest easy and not be reminded of the fact that we were victims.

But in any case, Himeno and I were sick of it—sick of the people around us, and even a little sick of ourselves for being unable to have any other relationships with the rest of the class.

The biggest problem for us was that we couldn't really laugh. We never figured out how to react at the same time as the rest of the kids. If I tried to force my facial muscles into that expression, I could almost hear something at the core of myself scraping and grinding down. Himeno probably felt something similar. Even when someone was directly looking for a response from us, we wouldn't raise an eyebrow. We couldn't, in fact.

The rest of the class thought we were stuck-up and pretentious. We probably were. But that wasn't the only reason we couldn't join in with them when they laughed. It was something more fundamental. Himeno and I were helplessly out of sync, like flowers blooming in the wrong season.

It was the summer when I was ten. Himeno pulled her schoolbag out of the trash can for at least the thirtieth time, and I put on the shoes they'd cut open with scissors, and we went to sit on the stone steps of the shrine, lit by the setting sun and waiting for something.

From our position, we could look down on the place where the summer festival would be held. Stands and carts lined the narrow path to the shrine, with two rows of paper lanterns hanging over them like runway light strips that brought a low red glow to the shrine grounds. The people milling about were in high spirits, which was why we couldn't go down to be among them.

Neither of us said anything, because we knew that if we did, the tears would spill over. So we kept our mouths shut and patiently sat there, bottling our feelings inside.

What Himeno and I were waiting for was *something* that would back us up and help everything make sense.

Perhaps we really were praying to the god of the shrine at that moment, with the droning of the cicadas flooding the air around us.

As the sun began to cross the horizon, Himeno rose to her feet, brushed the dust from her skirt, and stared straight ahead.

"In the future, we're going to be very important people," she said in that clear voice of purpose only she possessed. As if she were speaking a simple fact that had just been set in stone.

"…How far in the future are we talking about?" I asked.

"Probably not that soon. But not that far, either. About ten years, I bet."

"Ten years," I repeated. "We'll be twenty by then."

At ten years old, twenty was the age of adulthood and ultimate maturity. As far as I could tell, Himeno's statement was practical, even probable.

She continued, "*Something* will happen during the summer. Ten years from now, something's gonna happen for us. Something great. And then we'll finally be glad to be alive. Once we're important and rich, we'll look back on elementary school and say, 'That school didn't give us anything, not even a negative example to avoid. They were all idiots. It was just a terrible school.'"

"You're right. They *are* nothing but idiots. It *is* a terrible school," I repeated. Back then, that was a very fresh point of view for me. When you're in elementary school, it's your entire world, and it's difficult to consider it in terms of "good" or "bad."

"The point is, we need to be really important and rich in ten years. We can make our classmates so jealous, they'll all have heart attacks."

"So jealous, they'll chew off their own lips," I agreed.

"Otherwise, it wouldn't be fair," she said, grinning.

I didn't think Himeno was just trying to make me feel better. As soon as she said it, it felt as real to me as a vision of the actual future. The words had the ring of prophecy to them.

And it's not like we can't be big and famous. In ten years, we'll show them all. We'll make them regret mistreating us like this. They'll see.

"…Twenty years old. It's amazing, if you think about it," said Himeno, pulling her hands behind her back as she stared at the sunset. "We'll be twenty in ten years."

"We can drink alcohol. We can smoke. We can get married—well, I guess we can do that earlier," I said.

"That's true. Girls can get married when they're sixteen."

"It's eighteen for guys. But I feel like I'll probably never get married."

"How come?"

"I hate too many things. I despise everything that happens in the world. How can I possibly get along with someone for the rest of my life?"

"I see. Maybe that's true for me, too," said Himeno, her face downcast. In the light of the setting sun, her profile looked as if it belonged to a completely different person. She seemed more grown-up and more fragile. Breakable.

"Well…in that case," she continued, glancing at me very briefly before looking away again, "when we turn twenty, and we're important and powerful…if we're both sad enough not to have anyone to marry…"

She coughed, clearing her throat.

"…then why don't we be leftovers together?"

Even at my immature age, I could tell the change in her voice was evidence of bashfulness.

"What do you mean?" I replied, also feeling awkwardly polite.

"…I'm kidding. Forget it," she said with a laugh, trying to play it off. "I just wanted to try saying that. I know I'll never be a leftover."

"Ah, that's good." I laughed, too.

But—stupid as it was—even after Himeno and I went separate ways in life, I always remembered that promise. Even when a reasonably attractive girl showed interest in me, I would firmly turn her down. I did it in middle school. In high school. And in college.

I did that so when we met again, I could show her I was a leftover after all.

As I said, it was a really stupid idea.

Ten years have passed since then.

And when I look back, I think, *Maybe that really was the most wonderful time of my life.*

2.

The Beginning of the End

After the nineteenth instance that day of saying “I’m very sorry” and bowing deeply at the waist, I got dizzy, fell over, hit my head, and lost consciousness—or so I was told.

It was while I was working a part-time shift at a beer garden. The cause was obvious. It would happen to anyone if they worked in the sweltering heat without having anything to eat. Recklessly, I walked myself back home to my apartment after that, but my eyes felt as if they were being clawed out of their sockets, so I ended up going to the hospital anyway.

By taking a taxi to the emergency room, my already dire financial situation got even worse. On top of that, my boss told me to take some time off work. That meant I had to cut back on living expenses even more, but I didn’t know what there was left to cut. I couldn’t even remember the last time I had a meal with meat in it. I hadn’t trimmed my hair in four months, and I hadn’t bought a single piece of clothing since the coat from two winters ago. I hadn’t gone to hang out with anyone since starting college.

I had reasons that I couldn’t ask my parents for help; I had to take care my own income.

It hurt to sell off my CDs and books. They were all used and painstakingly chosen with the strictest judgment to ensure I had the best of the best. But without a computer or TV, that was about all I had that was worth any money.

Before I said good-bye, I decided to listen to each CD one last time in order. I put my headphones on, lay down on the tatami, and pressed play. Then I hit the switch on the room fan with blue blades that I bought at a secondhand shop, and I periodically went to the kitchen to fill my cup with water.

It was the first time I missed any college classes. But I knew nobody would care that I was absent. Perhaps they didn’t even notice I was gone.

One by one, I moved the CDs from the stack on the right to the stack on the left.

It was summer, and I was twenty. But as Paul Nizan once wrote, “I won’t let anyone say those are the best years of your life.”

Ten years from now, something’s gonna happen for us. Something great. And then we’ll finally be glad to be alive, Himeno prophesied back then, and she was dead wrong. Not a single “good” thing had happened to *me*, at least, and it wasn’t going to get better anytime soon.

I wondered what she was doing now. Her family moved away in the summer of fourth grade. I hadn’t seen her since.

It wasn’t supposed to be like this.

But maybe it was for the best. This way, she wouldn’t have to see how dull and ordinary I’d become over the course of middle school, high school, and college.

On the other hand, you could also say that if my childhood friend had come to my middle school with me, I might not have turned out this way. Whenever she was around, I was on edge—but in a good way. If I did something stupid, she would laugh at me, and if I did something laudable, she would be frustrated. That kind of motivation kept me at my best, I think.

It was a regret that I returned to quite often over the last few years.

If my younger self could see me now, what would he think?

After three days of listening to the majority of my CDs, I kept just a handful of the most precious and stuck the rest in a paper bag. My other bag was already packed with books. Then I headed out into the city, holding one in each hand. After a while of walking in the sun, my ears began to ring. Maybe it was just a phantom sound caused by the irregular buzzing of the cicadas. It sounded as if one of them was right next to my ear.

The first time I visited that used bookstore was last summer, a few months after I started college. I didn’t have a clear map of the area in my head yet, and I got lost on the way. There was a period of nearly an hour when I didn’t have a good grasp on where I was walking.

After passing down a side alley and climbing some stairs, I found the bookstore. I tried to go back there several times since, but I couldn’t figure out where it was. When I wanted to look it up, I couldn’t remember the name. It always worked out that I stumbled across it when I was lost. It was as if the store itself was appearing and disappearing with a mind of its own. Only this year had I been able to finally get there without losing my way.

When I arrived this time, morning glories were blooming in front of the shop. Out of sheer habit, I checked the clearance racks with the cheapest books they wanted to get rid of outside the front door before going inside.

The interior was dimly lit and smelled like aging paper. The sound of a radio was coming from the back.

The aisles were so narrow that I could only get through by turning sideways. At last I called out to the shop owner, a timid-looking, wrinkled old man who peered out between stacks of books. The old man never flashed a smile at anyone, no matter who you were. When it came time to check out, he just stared down and murmured the price as he read it off the sheet.

But this day was different. When I told him I was here to sell books, he actually lifted his head and looked me straight in the eyes.

I could definitely sense something like shock in his expression. I suppose that made sense. All the books I was selling were the meaningful kind you wanted to keep around, even if you'd read them dozens of times already. Giving them away would be an incomprehensible act to an avid reader.

"Are you moving or something?" he asked. I was surprised at how clear his voice sounded.

"No, I'm not."

"Then," he said, eyeing the pile of books before him, "why would you do such a wasteful thing?"

"Paper doesn't taste very good, and it won't give me vitamins."

The old man seemed to understand my joke. "So you're hard up for money," he said with a scowl.

When I nodded, he crossed his arms and said nothing, thinking it over. He decided to go ahead and sighed. "It'll take about thirty minutes to assess them," he said, and then took the books into the back.

I went outside and looked at the faded bulletin board along the street. There were posters for the summer festival, a firefly-viewing event, stargazing, and a public reading. From over the wall behind the board came the familiar scent of incense and tatami mats, human body odor, and wood.

Wind chimes rang from a distant house.

When the old man was done judging the worth of the books, he handed me about two-thirds of what I was expecting and said, "Hey, I've got something to say to you."

"What is it?"

"You need money, right?"

"Well, that's nothing new," I said, deflecting the question, but it seemed to satisfy the old man.

"Listen, I have no interest in finding out how poor you are or how you became so. I just have one question for you," he said. After a pause, he continued, "Do you feel like selling your life span?"

The unexpected sentence delayed my reaction.

“Life span?” I asked, trying to confirm what he meant.

“Yes. I’m not the one who will buy it, actually. But you can sell it for a lot.”

I might have blamed my ear for mishearing due to the heat, but it wasn’t hot enough for that.

I thought it over.

My initial conclusion was that the old man’s fear of aging had caused his brain to go soft.

Upon seeing my expression, the shopkeeper said, “I don’t blame you for thinking I’m pulling one over on you. I wouldn’t be surprised if you think I’m senile. But I’d suggest playing along with this daft old codger and going to the place I tell you about. You’ll see I’m telling the truth.”

I took his story with a grain of salt—but it boiled down to this.

On the fourth floor of a building not too far from here, there was a business that bought and sold life. The price varied by person, especially with regard to how fulfilling the life you would have led in that time was going to be.

“I barely know the first thing about you, but from what I can see, you don’t look like a bad guy, and your taste in books is admirable. Maybe you’ll be worth something.”

It brought to mind the memory of that old class on morals in my elementary school years.

According to the man, you could deal not only your own life span, but also your time and health.

“What’s the difference between life span and time?” I asked. “I guess I don’t really understand the distinction between life span and health, either.”

“Don’t know the details. I’ve never sold anything to them. But…you know how some people who are extraordinarily unhealthy manage to live on for decades, and sometimes perfectly healthy folks just up and die? Wouldn’t that be the difference between life span and health? I couldn’t tell ya about the time part.”

He jotted down a little map and a phone number on a memo sheet. I thanked him and left the store.

But I’m sure anyone would come to the same conclusion as I did: that the “store where they buy your life span” was just a fantasy cooked up by the old man’s desires. He was afraid of his own impending death, and so indulging in a vision of a place where you could buy more life to live was keeping him sane.

I mean, it only makes sense, right? A store like that is way too convenient to be real.

* * *

My expectations were only half-correct.

It was not, in fact, an easy-peasy deal ripe for the taking.

But my expectations were also half-wrong.

There *was* a store that bought and sold life span.

After selling my books, I headed to a CD shop in town. The heat radiating off the asphalt was horrendous, and sweat was pouring from every part of my skin. I was thirsty, too, but I didn't have the money to spend on canned drinks from a vending machine. I had to deal with it until I got home to the apartment.

Unlike the bookstore, the CD shop had air-conditioning. When the automatic doors opened and the cold air engulfed my body, I felt like stretching. I gulped in the air, pulling the coldness deep within me. The store was playing a summer jam that was popular around the time I started middle school.

I headed for the counter and called out to the employee with bleached hair who was always there, then lifted my other bag and pointed at it. He looked suspicious. Then his expression changed, suggesting I was performing some act of hideous betrayal. The look that said, "I can't believe someone like you would be getting rid of so many CDs at once." In other words, the exact same reaction as the old man's at the used bookstore.

"What's the situation, man?" the employee said to me. He was a skinny guy in his late twenties with drooping eyes. He wore a T-shirt with a rock band on it and faded jeans. His fingers were always moving about restlessly.

Just as I had at the bookstore, I explained why I needed to sell my CDs, and the employee clapped his hands and said, "In that case, I actually have something you might wanna hear. I'm not supposed to tell you about this, but I gotta say, I think you have incredible taste in music, so I'll let you know, just this one time."

It might as well have been a speech straight out of a how-to-scam-a-sucker manual, word for word.

He said, "There's a business in this town that will buy your life span from you."

"Life span?" I repeated. Of course, this was how I replied the last time. But I couldn't help myself.

"Yeah, life span," he said, dead serious.

Is there some game going around where people tease the desperately poor?

I was thinking about how to respond to this when he launched into a quick explanation. It was largely the same as what the old man at the bookstore said, but this guy claimed he had actually gone through with it. I asked him how much he got for it, but then he started playing coy. “I don’t think I feel comfortable saying.”

The man with the bleached hair jotted down a map and phone number and gave it to me. As expected, it was a perfect match for the information from the old man.

I gave him an empty thanks and left. As soon as I was out in the sun again, the oppressive, clinging heat returned, hugging my entire body. *Just this one time would be all right*, I told myself. I put a coin into the vending machine just a few steps away and eventually settled on a mild apple cider.

I held the can between both hands to enjoy the chill, then popped the tab and took my time drinking it. The unique sweetness of a soft drink filled my mouth. It had been a long time since I had any carbonated beverages, so each gulp prickled at my throat. When I finished the last swallow, I threw the empty can into the trash.

I took the two maps out of my pocket and looked at them. The distance wasn’t unwalkable.

If I went to that building, they would pay me money to take away my life span or time or good health, according to the story.

What a load of BS.

I clicked my tongue, wadded up the maps, and threw them away.

But I wound up standing in front of the building anyway.

It was an older structure. The walls were so darkened with age that it was impossible to tell what color it was originally painted. Even the building itself probably couldn’t remember. It was narrow, as if the buildings on either side were compressing it into a smaller shape.

The elevator wasn’t working, so I had to climb the stairs up to the fourth floor. I took one sweaty step at a time up the stairwell, through yellowed fluorescent light and musty air.

I didn’t believe the story about them buying up life spans. But I did interpret it in a different way: Perhaps, for reasons the two men couldn’t explain directly, there was some kind of job they were hiring for that involved life-shrinking risks but paid extremely well.

The first door I saw on the fourth floor had no sign on it. And yet I was certain it was the place they were talking about.

I held my breath and stared at the doorknob for about five seconds, then steeled myself and grabbed it.

The space on the other side was unthinkably clean, given the exterior appearance of the building. But that did not shock me. There were empty display cases in the center of the room and empty shelves lining the walls, but all of that seemed natural to me.

On the other hand, the room was very strange from a commonsense perspective. Like a jeweler without any jewels. An eyewear shop without any glasses. A bookstore without any books.

Until I heard the voice, I didn't even realize a person was standing right next to me.

"Welcome."

I turned toward the sound and saw a seated woman wearing a suit. She stared at me appraisingly through glasses with a delicate frame.

She saved me the trouble of asking what kind of a store this was by broaching the topic before I could speak.

"Time? Health? Life span?"

I was tired of thinking.

If you want to have fun at my expense, then go ahead.

"Life span," I said without hesitation.

I was going to go along with it. I had hardly anything else left to lose at this point.

* * *

The vague expectations I had were that my life had about sixty years left, which should buy me somewhere in the ballpark of six hundred million yen. I wasn't as confident as I was in elementary school, but I was still certain my value was greater than the average person. In other words, I figured each year should be good for ten million yen.

Even at this time in my life, I couldn't escape from the idea that I was *special*. There was nothing supporting that assumption. I was just dragging the glory of my past along with me. I was refusing to face the miserable lack of good fortune in my life and telling myself, *One of these days, I'm gonna hit it so big that all the time I've wasted will seem like nothing.*

With each year I got older, the success I dreamed about grew in size. People tend to swing for the fences the more boxed in they get, and that's just human nature. When you're down ten runs in the bottom of the ninth, playing it safe with a sacrifice bunt isn't going to get you anywhere. Instead, you swing for the big hit, even knowing that the odds of missing are much higher.

In time, I even started to think about eternal glory. The kind of success where everyone knows your name, a success that becomes legend and never fades. It was getting to the point where nothing less would save my life.

For someone like me to course-correct and get things right, I probably needed someone to completely and utterly call me out for my delusion. I needed to be beaten down to absolutely nothing when I had no escape and no means to defend myself.

In that sense, selling my life span was probably the right choice.

Because that was where I learned that not only had I wasted my past, but my future was also destined to be the same.

Upon closer examination, the woman in the suit was quite young. In terms of her physical appearance, she was probably somewhere between eighteen and twenty-four years of age.

She told me the examination period would last about three hours. She was already typing at the computer next to her. I figured there must be some kind of tiresome paperwork involved, but she said I didn't even need to give her my name. And in just three hours, she would know the value of the supposedly priceless life I had left to live. They would decide the number, of course, so it wasn't some fixed value. But it *was* a standard.

I left the building and wandered around aimlessly. The sky was getting a bit darker. My legs were exhausted. I was hungry. I wanted to find a restaurant of some kind where I could sit down and rest, but I didn't have enough money to do that.

Luckily, I found a Seven Stars cigarette and a hundred-yen lighter on a bench in the shopping district. I looked around the area but didn't see a likely owner. I sat down on the bench and discreetly slipped them into my pocket, then found a side street next to some discarded materials and lit the cigarette. It had been so long since the last time I smoked that my throat felt sore.

I stepped on the cigarette and headed for the station. I was getting thirsty again.

At the bench in the open area outside the train station, I sat and watched the pigeons. A middle-aged woman at the bench across the way was feeding them. Her outfit was a little too young for someone her age, and the way she threw the food indicated she was anxious. I found it hard to describe how this made me feel. On the other hand, I was intimately familiar with the self-hatred I felt when I realized that the sight of pigeons eating bread was

whetting my appetite. If I was any hungrier, I might be down there scrabbling for crumbs with the birds.

Please let the price be nice and hefty, I thought.

Like most people do when their goods are being assessed, I tried to keep my expectations low. My initial guess was six hundred million yen for my life span, but I decided it was better to go in looking at the lowest possible number so I wouldn't be disappointed when I got the estimate, even if it was on the low side.

The number I arrived at was three hundred million.

When I was a kid, I thought my life would be worth three billion yen. Compared with *that*, this was a very humble estimation.

But I was still being naive about my own low value. I remembered how Himeno said the lifetime earnings of the average Japanese salaryman was two to three hundred million yen. But I had forgotten that immediately after the gloomy classmate with the depressing future started talking, I had thought, *Sure, if I had a life like hers, I wouldn't put a price on it, either. I'd probably have to sell it at a loss*.

I went back to the store early, sat down on the sofa, and was starting to nod off for a bit when the woman called my name and woke me up.

She had finished her assessment.

I heard her say, "Mr. Kusunoki." But I didn't remember telling her my identity at any point or showing her any form of identification. She had the means of learning such things, apparently.

There was something about this place that was indeed beyond the bounds of normal understanding.

Despite the odds, by the time I returned to the building, I had decided to believe in the incredibly dubious idea that someone could buy your life span for money. There were a number of complex interlocking factors that influenced my view, but the strongest was that woman.

Maybe it was illogical to get such an impression about someone you'd just met. But I felt…there was no lie in whatever she did. I could just feel it. There are people who simply despise dishonesty, regardless of any notion of righteousness or morality, regardless of even their own personal gain or loss. She was one of those people, I sensed.

When I looked back on this moment later, it was easy to see just how poor my instincts had been.

Returning to the topic of my appraisal…

When I heard the woman say the number three, my face momentarily betrayed the part of me that hadn't given up hope, or so I came to

understand later. I reacted honestly and instinctually, confirming that my childhood guess of three billion really was correct.

The woman saw my look and awkwardly scratched at her cheek with a finger. She seemed to think it wouldn't be right to tell me the results this way—instead, she glanced at the computer window, typed something on the keyboard, and placed a printout on the counter.

"This is the result of your appraisal. What is your decision?"

When I first saw the number three hundred thousand on the sheet, I thought it was the amount for each year.

If a life was eighty years, that would be twenty-four million yen.

Twenty-four million, the voice in my head repeated. I felt all the strength draining from my body. *How could it be that cheap?*

It was at this point that I decided I was suspicious of the place again. This might be some TV show prank or some psychological test. It could even be just a simple and especially cruel hoax…

But none of my excuses made a difference. The only thing that provided me any proper measure of disbelief was my common sense. Every *other* sense I had was telling me that whatever this woman said was correct. And one of my rules in life was that if you were faced with an illogical situation, you ought to trust your gut instinct, not the rationality of "common sense."

I simply had to accept the twenty-four million yen total. Even doing that took considerable bravery.

But then the woman delivered the harsh truth.

"That means the yearly price is the lowest possible price of ten thousand yen. Your remaining life is listed at thirty years and three months, so you can walk out this door with about three hundred thousand yen."

When I laughed then, it was not because I took her words to be a joke, but because, objectively speaking, it was my life that was the joke.

The true value of my life was literally orders of magnitude less than what I thought it was.

"Of course, this does not indicate some kind of universal value. That is simply the total we arrived at after measuring you against our standard," the woman explained.

"I'd like to know more about this standard," I said. She sighed with disgust. Maybe it was something she'd heard thousands of times before.

"The detailed appraisal is performed by a different consultative body, so even I do not know exactly how it works. But from what I know, the result is largely influenced by the ability to satisfy certain values, such as good fortune, fulfillment, and contribution… In essence, how happy you will be

throughout the rest of your life, how happy you will make others, making dreams come true, and contributing to society all play a big part in the appraised value of that life."

It was the impartiality of it that broke me down.

If I *only* wasn't happy myself, or *only* failed to make others happy, or *only* failed to achieve my dreams, or *only* did nothing for society—if I had no value in just one of these things, I could take it. But to be miserable, to make no one else happy, to fail to reach my dreams, and to do nothing for society, all at once? What possible hope could there be for me in such a life?

And for a twenty-year-old, the remainder of thirty years seemed much too brief. Would I fall terribly ill? Would I meet with some untimely accident?

I decided to go for broke and asked, "Why is the rest of my life so short?"

"I'm very sorry," she said, tilting her head, "but any further information can only be revealed to customers who choose to sell either their time, health, or life span."

I stared at her forehead and considered this. "Give me a minute to think it over."

"Please take your time," she said, but from the tone of her voice, it was clear she wanted me to hurry the hell up.

In the end, I chose to sell all remaining thirty years, leaving only three months. After a life of working dead-end jobs and selling my last prized books and CDs, I had lost all resistance to the idea of liquidating everything I had for cheap.

While the woman read off every last part of the contract for me, I simply murmured to indicate I was there, but my mind was empty. When she asked if I had any questions, I said, "Not really."

I just wanted to wrap it up and get out.

Out of the store. Out of my life.

"You can perform up to three transactions in total," the woman explained. "That means you have two more opportunities to buy or sell life span, health, or time."

I took the envelope with my three hundred thousand yen inside and left the building.

I couldn't begin to guess how they did it, but I did indeed feel as though I'd lost my future. It was as if something that had filled me to the core had been 90 percent removed from my being. Apparently, chickens can run around for a while after their heads are chopped off, and this felt close to that. You could have called me a corpse.

Now that my body was all but certain to die before I turned twenty-one, it was much more impatient than a body that intended to live to eighty. The weight of each empty second passing was much greater. When I expected to live to eighty, I always had that unconscious arrogance of knowing I had sixty more years in me. Now that sixty years had become just three months, I was plagued by an insistence that I always had to *do something*.

But for now, I just wanted to go home and sleep. I'd been walking all day, and I was exhausted. I could think about what to do once I'd slept all I could and woke up refreshed.

On the way home, I passed a strange man. He looked to be in his early twenties, and he was walking alone with a huge smile on his face, as if he couldn't contain his joy.

It made me furious.

I stopped by a liquor store in the shopping area and bought four cans of beer, then found a street cart nearby, where I ordered five skewers of yakitori chicken. I ate and drank my fill on the way home.

I had three months left. There wasn't a need to watch my money anymore.

It had been a long time since I last had alcohol. Maybe it was a bad idea when I was feeling down. In any case, I got drunk very quickly, and not even thirty minutes after I stumbled home, I was vomiting.

That was how my last three months started.

It was about as bad of a start as you could get.

3.

The Seated Monitor

I already felt terrible, and it was a miserably hot night. So when I dreamed, it was very vivid and memorable.

After I woke up, I mulled over the dream while underneath my blanket. It wasn't a bad one. If anything, it was happy. But there's nothing crueler than a happy dream.

In it, I was a teenager in a park. It wasn't a park I knew, but I was there with classmates from elementary school. Apparently, there was a class reunion going on.

Everyone was playing around with firecrackers. The smoky haze was lit red by the sparklers. I was standing at the edge of the park and watching them.

How is high school? asked Himeno, who was suddenly there next to me.

I tried to glance at her sidelong, but her face was blurry. I didn't know her after age ten, so I suppose my brain couldn't imagine how she looked.

But my dream self thought she was utterly beautiful. He was proud to have known her for years before that point.

I'm not really enjoying it, I said honestly. *But it's not the worst.*

I guess I'd say the same, agreed Himeno.

Secretly, I was happy to hear her teen years were miserable, just like mine.

I find myself thinking, she went on, *that life was fun back then.*

Back when? I asked.

Rather than answer, Himeno crouched down and looked up at me. *So are you still a leftover, Kusunoki?*

I suppose, I replied, watching her closely. I wanted to see her reaction.

Oh, Himeno said, smirking a bit. *Well, I suppose I am, too.*

Then she grinned, her cheeks dimpled, and she added, *That's good. Right on schedule.*

Yeah, right on schedule, I agreed.

And then I woke up.

It wasn't the kind of dream you were supposed to have when you were twenty. It was so childish; I felt disgusted with myself. But a part of me was

desperately trying to cling to the memory. I didn't want to let it melt away into nothing.

It was true that when I was ten, I didn't really like Himeno all that much. Whatever affection I held for her, it was very small.

The problem was that a "very small affection" was something I never felt for a single person after that point.

Perhaps that seemingly tiny bit of tenderness was actually the greatest I would ever feel in my life—and I didn't even notice it until long after she was gone.

After I had memorized all the tiny details of my dream about Himeno, I lay there in my bed, thinking about the day before. I had gone to that faded old building and sold all my future life, except for three months.

It wasn't like some waking dream that seemed unreal in the light of the following day. It was an utterly real experience in my mind.

Not that I regretted selling the vast majority of the rest of my life span on a sudden whim. And I didn't suddenly realize the value of what I'd lost. If anything, I felt relief, as if a weight had been lifted off my shoulders.

The thing that kept me attached to life was a shallow hope that maybe, just maybe, something good might happen in the future. As baseless as that hope was, it was extraordinarily difficult to give it up. Even the most worthless human can hope for that improbable stroke of luck that wipes out all that misfortune.

That was my salvation, and my trap. In a way, having someone definitively tell me, "Nothing good will happen in the life ahead of you" was kind of liberating.

Now I could die in peace.

At this point, I might as well enjoy my remaining time. I wanted to be able to say, "It was a crappy life, but once I accepted my death, the three months were pretty happy in the end" when my time was up.

First, I'd go to the bookstore and read some magazines, then think about what to do with my time, I thought—and then my doorbell rang.

I wasn't expecting a visitor. Nobody had visited me once in the last few years, and I couldn't imagine it happening in the next three months, either. Someone got the wrong door or was raising funds for charity or was looking to convert new believers. In any case, I didn't have a good feeling about it.

The bell rang again. I bolted to my feet and immediately felt a return of the powerful nausea from last night. I was hungover. But I managed to stumble over to the entryway to open my door. Standing outside was a girl I

didn't recognize. And next to her was a wheeled suitcase that clearly belonged to her.

"…And you are?" I asked.

She gave me an exasperated look, then irritably removed a pair of glasses from her bag and placed them on her face, glaring at me as though the answer should be obvious now.

And then I knew who she was.

"The one who appraised my life span yesterday…"

"That's right," she said.

The impression her suit left was so strong that I hadn't recognized her at all in plain clothes. She wore a cotton blouse and saxe-blue denim skirt. Her black hair hung down to her shoulders and curved inward a bit, though I couldn't tell that yesterday with it tied up. I sensed a note of loneliness in her eyes. Below her skirt, her slender right leg had a large bandage on the thigh. The wound must have been deep, because I could see it even through the bandage.

At our first meeting, I couldn't pinpoint her age as anything more specific than eighteen to twenty-four, but seeing her now, I had a much better idea. She was about my age. Nineteen or twenty.

But what was she doing here?

The first thing that popped into my head was that she came to tell me there was a mistake in the appraisal. She got the number of digits wrong. Maybe she mixed it up with someone else's results. A part of me hoped she was here for an apology.

She removed her glasses again, neatly tucked them into their case, then stared at me with emotionless eyes.

"My name is Miyagi. I'll be your monitor from now on," she said and bowed to me.

Monitor. I'd completely forgotten. She did mention something like that, I now recalled. I also remembered how overwhelming the nausea was and ran to the bathroom to throw up.

When I emerged from the bathroom with a completely empty stomach, Miyagi was standing right on the other side of the doorway. It might have been her job, but she didn't know how to keep her distance. I pushed her out of my way to get to the sink, where I washed my face and gargled, slugged down a cup of water, then returned to my bed on the floor. My head was killing me. The humidity wasn't helping.

“As I explained to you yesterday,” said Miyagi, who was standing next to my pillow now, “you have less than one year of life left, so from now on, you will have a monitor at all times. Furthermore…”

“Can you go over this later?” I asked, outwardly annoyed. “As you can see, I’m not in a great condition to listen now.”

“Very well. I’ll wait.”

Then Miyagi took her suitcase to the corner of the room, placed her back against the wall, and sat down, cradling her legs with her arms.

And then she just stared at me.

Apparently, her plan was simply to sit in place and monitor me from there, for as long as I was inside my apartment.

“Treat me as though I am not even here, if you’d like,” Miyagi told me from the corner. “Don’t mind me. Just live out your life like you always do.”

But her reassurance did not change the fact that I was being watched by a girl who could not be two years apart from me in age. I couldn’t help but be aware of her, and I stole a glance in her direction. She was writing something in a notebook. Maybe she was making some kind of observation record.

It was unpleasant, being scrutinized like this. I felt the side of myself that was facing her prickling, burning from her gaze.

She had indeed given me a detailed explanation of the monitor role yesterday. According to Miyagi, many of the people who sold their life span there grew despondent and desperate when they had less than a year left and started causing problems. I didn’t ask what “problems” these were, exactly, but I could guess.

The reason people follow the rules is because of the weight trust and reputation hold in life. But when you know for a fact that your life is about to end, things change. Reputation doesn’t go with you to the afterlife.

So to prevent people who sold their life span from becoming erratic and harming others, they set up the monitor system. Anyone with less than a year left received a monitor. If they started acting inappropriately, the monitor would immediately send word back to base, and they would cut you off right there, regardless of how much time was actually left. With a single phone call, the girl sitting in the corner of my room could end my life.

However—apparently, this was shown through data to be an effective method—once they were just a few days from death, people stopped feeling the urge to harass others. So when there were only three days left, the monitor would leave.

I’d only be alone for the last three days of my life.

I don't know exactly when I fell asleep. The next thing I knew, my headache and nausea were gone. The clock said it was around seven in the evening. It was about the worst possible way I could have spent the first day of my last three months of life.

Miyagi was still there, unmoving, in the corner of the room.

I endeavored to go about my normal business while not thinking about her. I washed my face with cold water, changed into a pair of faded blue jeans and a ragged T-shirt, then went out to buy dinner. My monitor followed me about five steps behind.

I had to shade my eyes against the powerful light of the setting sun. The sunset was yellow today. The cicadas were buzzing from the distant woods. Smaller automobiles passed sluggishly on the road next to the sidewalk.

Eventually, I arrived at a pit-stop restaurant along the old national highway. It was a wide, squat building with trees behind it that grew over the roof. From signs to roof to walls, it was hard to find a spot that *wasn't* faded with time. Inside the building were about ten vending machines lined up along the wall and two narrow tables with pepper-flake shakers and ashtrays on them. The music from a few arcade cabinets that were at least ten years old played from the corner, which brought the faintest touch of warmth to the lonely, run-down interior.

I put three hundred yen into a noodle vending machine and smoked a cigarette while I waited for the machine to prepare my bowl. Miyagi sat in a round chair and looked up at the one fluorescent light that was flickering. How was she going to eat while she was monitoring me? I didn't think she could go without food and water, but she was just creepy enough that I had to wonder if that was true. She was like an automaton, I guess. Barely human.

When I was finished slurping down cheap-tasting tempura soba—at least it was hot—I bought a can of coffee from the beverage machine and drank it. The heavily sweetened iced coffee seeped into the dried-out husk of my body.

The reason I was choosing bad food out of a vending machine when I only had three months left to live was because I didn't know anything else. The person I'd been never had the option to go a little out of his comfort zone and eat at a fancy restaurant. My last few years of poverty had completely sapped me of any kind of imagination.

When I returned to the apartment after my meal, I took a pen and my notebook and decided to put my future actions into a list of bullet points. At

first, it was easier to think of things I *didn't* want to do rather than things I did, but as I wrote, some things I wanted to accomplish before I died came to my mind.

Things to do before I die
- Don't go to college
- Don't work
- Don't hold back when you want something
- Eat something delicious
- Look at something beautiful
- Write a will
- Meet with Naruse and talk
- Meet with Himeno and tell her how I feel

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

I turned around saw Miyagi standing behind me, rather than sitting in the corner. She was looking over my shoulder at what I was writing.

To my surprise, the item she was pointing at was *Meet with Himeno and tell her how I feel*.

"Does a monitor have an obligation to spy on their target and intrude with advice?" I asked her.

Miyagi didn't answer my question. Instead, she told me, "This Himeno person has been through a lot. She gave birth at age seventeen. Then she quit high school and got married at eighteen but was divorced a year later. Now that she's twenty, she's living with her parents and raising her baby. Two years from now, she's scheduled to kill herself by jumping. And her last message will be extremely dark… If you go to see her now, nothing good will happen. And Himeno barely remembers you. She certainly doesn't remember the special *promise* you made when you were ten."

I could barely speak. It felt as if all the air in my lungs had been sucked out.

"…You know that much about me?" I mumbled at last. Desperately trying to hide my panic, I asked, "Based on what you just said, it sounds like you know everything that's about to happen, too. Is that right?"

Miyagi blinked a few times, then shook her head.

"What I know is what *might* have happened in your life ahead, Mr. Kusunoki. At this point, such information is pointless, of course. By selling your life span, your future was greatly changed. And out of those things that *might* have happened, I only know the most important events."

Without taking her eyes off the notebook, Miyagi reached up and pulled her hair back behind her ear. “It seems Himeno was someone very important to you. The plot synopsis of your life was all about her.”

“Only relatively speaking,” I protested. “It just means nothing else was very important to me at all.”

“You may be right,” said Miyagi. “All I can tell you now is that going to see Himeno would be a waste of your time. It will only ruin the memories you have of her.”

“Thanks for your concern. But they were ruined long ago.”

“I’ve still saved you time, haven’t I?”

“Maybe. Anyway, are you allowed to just tell people about the future like that?”

She looked curious. “If I might turn the question back on you, why did you assume I shouldn’t?”

I couldn’t come up with a good answer. If I tried to use that future information to cause trouble, Miyagi could simply call back in and have the rest of my life cut off.

“In essence, we just want you all to live the rest of your lives in tranquility,” she explained. “That’s why I am giving you advice based on your future and warning you away from actions that might harm you.”

I scratched my head. I wanted to snap back at her, to tear into her.

“Maybe you think what you’re doing is helping me avoid hurt or disappointment. But couldn’t you also say that what you’re doing is robbing me of the *freedom* to be hurt or disappointed? Let’s say… Let’s say I actually wanted to hear that from Himeno directly, not from you, so that it could wound me. All you’ve done is stuck your nose in where you’re not wanted.”

Miyagi sighed with obvious annoyance.

“Oh, I see. I thought I was just being a good person. If that were the case, then maybe what I said would have been careless. I’m very sorry,” she said, then bowed to me. “But let me also say,” she continued, “that I wouldn’t go in expecting much in the way of fairness or integrity from what’s going to happen next. You sold your future life away. That means you leaped into a world that works on cruel and illogical principles. There is almost no point in arguing for your own freedom or rights here. You did this to yourself.”

Then Miyagi returned to the corner of the room and wrapped her arms around her legs again.

“But for this one time, I will choose to respect your freedom to be hurt or disappointed, and I will not comment on the other items on your list. Feel free to do as you wish, so long as it does not cause undue harm to others. I will not stop you.”

That’s already what I was going to do. You don’t have to tell me, I thought.

I did not miss the look of faint sadness that crossed Miyagi's face. But I didn't think that hard about what the expression might mean, either.

4.

Let's Check the Answer

From here, my idiocy only accelerated.

I told Miyagi, "I'm going out to place a call. I'll be right back" and left the apartment. I was going outside because I didn't want her listening to my conversation, but no surprise, Miyagi followed me right outside.

It had been ages since I called anyone. On the screen was the name *Wakana*. I stared at it for a long time. In the trees behind my apartment building, the summer insects were buzzing and chirping away.

Apparently, I was feeling nervous about hitting that last button. Thinking back on it, ever since I was a child, I had almost never invited someone else to hang out or reached out to make conversation. I'd lost many opportunities that way, but I'd also escaped just as many troubles and hassles. I didn't feel anything about it, regret or satisfaction.

I stopped thinking about it. In the few brief seconds of emptiness that followed, I pressed the call button on the phone. Once she actually picked up, I could handle it. I knew well enough what to talk about.

The sound of the ringtone ratcheted up my nerves. One, two, three times. Only at this point did I consider the possibility that the person on the other end might not answer. I had gone so long without using my phone to make calls that a part of me just assumed that if you placed the call, the other person would obviously pick up, no matter the time or place. Four, five, six times. Apparently, Wakana wasn't in a position to answer the phone. A part of me felt relief.

Once the ringtone sounded for the eighth time, I gave up and pressed the button again to end it.

Wakana was a girl from college from the year below me. I was going to ask her out for a meal. And if things somehow went well, I was going to ask her to hang out with me the entire time until my shortened life came to its end.

The loneliness suddenly surged up from within me. Now that the end of my life was clear and imminent, the first noticeable change in me was a new, alien desire to be around people. I just wanted to talk with someone, badly.

Wakana was the only person at college who showed any interest in me. We met at that same used bookstore this spring, when she had just started school. She was utterly absorbed in a dusty, tattered old book, and I sent her a look that said, “Move it, you’re in my way.” Somehow she interpreted that as “That guy’s totally staring at me—I don’t recognize him, but do I know him from somewhere?” It was the kind of mistake new students tended to make.

“Um, have we met before?” she asked me timidly.

“No,” I said. “We haven’t.”

“Oh. I’m sorry,” Wakana said, realizing her mistake. She looked away awkwardly. But she recovered promptly and grinned. “Then I suppose this used bookstore is where we met?”

Now it was my turn to be taken aback. “I guess so.”

“Yep. It’s wonderful,” she said, and she put the book back on the shelf.

A few days later, we were reunited on the school campus. Since then, we’d shared lunch on a few occasions and talked at length about books and music—even blowing off our classes to do so.

“You’re the first person my age I’ve met who reads more books than me,” Wakana said, her eyes sparkling.

“I’m just reading them. I don’t get anything out of it,” I replied. “I don’t have that part of my brain that’s supposed to keep anything of value from them. I’m just pouring out soup from a huge pot into a little tiny dish. As soon as it hits the dish, it’s spilling over, and the whole point is gone.”

“Is that how you describe it?” Wakana asked curiously. “It might not be helping you consciously, but even after you ‘forget,’ I think everything you’ve ever read is still somewhere there in your brain, finding a way to help you in ways you don’t even realize.”

“That might be true in some cases. But for me—speaking only from personal experience—spending all your time reading as a young person is unhealthy. Reading is for people with nothing else to do.”

“You don’t have anything to do, Kusunoki?”

“Not really. Not aside from my job,” I replied.

She gave me a very broad smile, jabbed me on the shoulder, and said, “Then I’ll give you something else.” Then she grabbed my cell phone and entered her own e-mail address and number into my contacts list.

If I had known that Himeno had already gotten pregnant, married, had her child, and divorced, and had completely forgotten all about me, I might have actually made a move with Wakana. But in the spring, I was still preserving my promise with Himeno and was determined to be a leftover at my twentieth birthday. So I never reached out to Wakana, and if she called

or texted me, I always let the conversation die within a few messages or minutes. I didn't want to get her hopes up.

Essentially, I always had the worst timing imaginable.

I didn't feel like leaving a message. Instead, I sent Wakana a text of what I was going to say over the phone. *Sorry this is coming out of the blue, but do you want to go somewhere tomorrow?* I put together the message very carefully, not to be too blunt, but not to destroy the image she had of me, either.

A reply came back at once. I won't lie—it was a relief. There was still someone out there who cared enough about me to write back.

Unusually for me, I felt like responding immediately, but when I opened the message, I realized my mistake.

The reply was not from Wakana. If that were all, it wouldn't have been so bad. But the sentence I saw on the screen of my phone said, instead, that the address was currently inactive.

Wakana had changed her e-mail address and not informed me. She had decided there was no need to maintain a line of communication with me.

Of course, it could have just been a mistake on her part. It was possible she would reply very soon with an update about where I could reach her.

But I was already fairly certain. My time had passed.

From the way I stared emptily at the screen, Miyagi sensed what had happened to me. She approached me and peered over my arm at the screen.

"Let's check the answer," she said.

"The girl you just tried to call was your final hope. Wakana was the last person who might have loved you. If you had given her a second thought in the spring when she hit on you, I think you would have been lovers in a close relationship now. The value of your life probably wouldn't have fallen so far…but you were too late. Wakana doesn't care about you anymore. In fact, she resents you now for not returning her affection, and she wishes she could show you the boyfriend she currently has."

Miyagi spoke so distantly and dispassionately that it was as if I wasn't even there.

"There will *never be another person* who tries to love you from this point on. When you only see other people as tools to ease your own loneliness, they often pick up on that."

I could hear bright, cheerful voices from the apartment next door. It sounded like a number of college students, male and female. The light from

the window looked far brighter than what was coming from my window adjacent to it. The old me would not have bothered to form an opinion about this, but right now, it stabbed me to the core.

At the worst possible moment, the phone rang. It was Wakana, calling back. I was going to ignore it at first, but I didn't want her to try again later, so I answered.

"You called me a moment ago, Kusunoki? What's the matter?" she asked. I'm sure she was speaking the same way she always had, but after what Miyagi had just said, it sounded critical. Silently asking, "Why are you bothering to contact me after all this time?"

"Sorry about that. It was a mistake," I said, trying to keep my voice light.

"Oh, of course. I'm not surprised. You're not the kind of person who calls other people," she chuckled. That, too, seemed tinged with mockery to me. As in, "That's exactly why I stopped bothering with you."

"Yeah, that's true," I said, thanked her for calling back to check, and hung up.

The room next door seemed even louder and brighter.

I didn't want to go back inside, so I lit up a cigarette right there. After smoking two of them, I headed for the nearby supermarket, took my time circling through it, and picked up a six-pack of beer, some fried chicken, and instant noodle cups. For the first time, I dipped into the three hundred thousand yen I got for selling my life span. Given the occasion, I wanted to splurge on something, but I didn't even know what would count as "splurging."

Miyagi carried a basket of her own and inserted a large number of very bland items like nutrition bars and mineral water. I didn't find it strange at all that she would buy such things, but try as I might, I was unable to summon a mental image of her actually consuming them. She was so lacking in humanity that the most primitive and human of acts—eating food—didn't match my image of her.

Inside my head, I told myself people might mistake us for a couple that lived together. It was a very stupid—but pleasing—fantasy. I even hoped that some of the people who passed us might share that illusion about us.

To be very frank, I found the presence of this girl named Miyagi obnoxious at all times. But for many years, I'd held a secret attraction to the idea of going out in casual clothes with a girl I lived with to buy food and alcohol. I sighed with envy whenever I saw others doing this. So even if she was only there to monitor me, the late-night shopping run with a girl was enjoyable.

That happiness was empty. But I couldn't deny I felt it.

Miyagi went to the self-checkout register and paid first. We returned to the apartment carrying bags of food. The clamor from the gathering next door was still ongoing, and I could hear constant footsteps through the wall.

In all honesty, I was jealous of them. I'd never felt like this before. I usually looked at people obviously entertaining themselves and thought only, *What exactly makes that fun anyway?*

But now that I was conscious of death, all the values I had twisted and perverted in my own way were straightening out, returning to their proper nature.

I began to desire companionship, as anyone else would.

At a time like this, most people might seek the solace of family, I thought. *Whatever your circumstances may be, family would always be on your side, so you should go back to them in the end*. At least, that was a line of thinking I was familiar with.

But family isn't a warm embrace for everyone. I was determined not to contact my family during my final three months of life, no matter what. I had very little time left, and I was absolutely certain I did not want to go out of my way to make that time more unpleasant.

Ever since my childhood, my younger brother had stolen my parents' affection from me. He was better at everything, for one thing. He was honest and upfront, and he was tall and handsome. From age twelve to his current age of nineteen, he had never been without a girlfriend when he wanted one, and his college was better than mine. He was athletic, and he even pitched in the national tournament for high school baseball. There wasn't a single area where I had the upper hand. When I stopped improving and actually regressed, it only cast my younger brother, who was growing greater by the year, in sharper relief.

It was only natural that their love favored him over me. Even though they treated me like a failure, I didn't think it was unfair. In fact, it was true that in comparison, I *was* a failure. If we had been given equal amounts of love, *that* would be unfair. I would have done the same thing as my parents in their position. What's wrong with loving the one who deserves it more, and investing in the one who will actually offer a return?

There was almost zero chance that going back home would allow me to live in the warmth and comfort of my family's unconditional love or whatever you wanted to call it. I had better odds of knocking on my neighbor's door and being accepted into their party.

While I heated up the water, I drank a beer and gnawed on the fried chicken. By the time my instant ramen was ready, I was already good and

tipsy. Alcohol was a universal panacea at times like this. As long as you drank the right amount.

I approached Miyagi, who was writing in her notebook in the corner, and asked, “Want to drink with me?” I didn’t care who it was; I just wanted someone to knock it back alongside me.

“No thank you. I’m working,” she said, without looking up from her notebook.

“I’ve been wondering—what are you writing?”

“My observation record. Of your actions.”

“Oh, okay. Then let me help you out. I’m drunk right now.”

“I suppose you are. You certainly look drunk,” Miyagi agreed.

“And not only that. I want to drink with you.”

“I know that. You just said so,” Miyagi grumbled, looking annoyed.

5.

Everything That Happens from This Point On

I turned out the lights and continued drinking. Fortunately, I managed to get peacefully drunk that night. Sometimes it's best not to fight the flow of feelings, but to leap into the abyss of despair headlong and wallow in the muck of your own self-pity. It can be the quickest way to get back on your feet.

My familiar apartment began to take on a slightly different meaning. The moonlight coming through the window was tinged with navy blue, and the night breeze of the summer filled the space, which felt alien and strange with Miyagi lurking in the corner like some kind of haunting spirit. I never knew this room could feel this way.

I felt as if I were in the wings of a stage. That if I stepped out, my act would finally begin.

Suddenly, I felt as though I could do anything. It was only because being drunk made me temporarily forget my own incompetence, but in that state, I mistakenly believed that something about me was shifting.

With great pomp and circumstance, I announced to Miyagi, "With the three hundred thousand yen and three months I have left, I'm gonna change something."

Then I drained the last of the beer in my can and set it down violently on the table.

Miyagi's reaction was cold. She raised her eyes just a few inches, asked, "Is that so?" and returned to her notebook.

Undeterred, I continued, "Yeah, maybe it's three hundred thousand yen, but it's my *life*. I'll make it go farther than thirty million or three hundred million. I'll work my ass off and hit back at the world."

To my drunken mind, this sounded extremely badass.

But Miyagi was not impressed. "Everyone says something like that."

She placed the pen down beside her, cradled her knees, and rested her chin between them.

"I've heard that line almost verbatim five times already. As death approaches, everyone's ideas get more and more extreme. The effect is especially pronounced among those whose lives have been unfulfilling. It's the same reason that people who keep losing bets aim for increasingly

unrealistic jackpots to win it all back. People who have spent their lives failing have to grasp for improbable happiness, I suppose. When death is imminent, they can finally see the relative brilliance of life regain some semblance of vitality. They fall into the trap of thinking, 'I was worthless before, but now that I've realized my mistake, I can do anything,' and they end up believing that fatal misconception. They're only standing at the *starting line*. It means that after a long losing streak of gambling, they've finally regained their wits. Nothing good comes from assuming this is your chance for a once-in-a-lifetime jackpot. Mr. Kusunoki, think carefully about this. The reason the price for the rest of your life was so low is because you would have been unable to achieve anything in your remaining thirty years on Earth. You understand that, don't you?" she said. "If you weren't going to accomplish anything in thirty years, how do you expect to do anything in three months?"

"…Never know unless you try," I argued, a trite sentiment. It made me sick to say it. The truth was obvious, long before I tried. She was absolutely correct.

"I would think it wise to seek a more mundane sort of satisfaction," Miyagi said. "There's no taking it back at this point. Three months is too short of a time to change anything. But it's also too long to spend doing nothing. Don't you think it would be smarter to find for yourself small but certain bits of happiness instead? You lose because you try to win. Finding the little victories amid your loss will leave you with less disappointment in the end."

"Fine, fine, I get it. But I'm tired of hearing about the right way to do things," I said, shaking my head. If I weren't drunk, I might have continued arguing with her, but in this state, I didn't have the willpower to overturn her wisdom. "I probably just don't fully understand how incompetent I am as a person… Will you tell me everything that would've happened? How was I going to live the next thirty years? Maybe hearing that will keep me from hoping for too much."

Miyagi did not speak at first. After a while, she sighed with resignation.

"Very well. Perhaps it would be better for you to learn everything at this point… But I'll tell you now, just in case, that there's no need for you to self-destruct after you hear me out. What I know about is what might have happened but is now guaranteed to never happen."

"I get it. What I'm going to hear is more like a divination… And if I can say one thing, it's that there's never a *need* to self-destruct. It just happens when there's nothing else to do."

"I'm hoping it doesn't come to that," Miyagi said.

There was a rumbling in the distance, like some gigantic tower crumbling to the ground. It took a while for me to realize it was a fireworks show. I hadn't actually gone to see any in years.

It was always something I watched through the window. I never bought fresh festival food from the cart to eat for the show. I never looked back and forth from the fireworks to the face of the girlfriend whose hand I was holding.

From the moment I was old enough to understand, I was an outcast. I avoided places full of people. When I found myself in those situations, it felt like some kind of mistake, and the thought of running into someone I knew there was terrifying. In elementary school, I never went to the park or the pool or the hills behind the school or the shopping district or the summer festival or the fireworks show unless someone forced me to go. As a teenager, I stayed away from recreational places and avoided the major streets when I walked through the city.

The last time I watched a fireworks show was when I was very young.

Himeno might have been there with me at the time, I think.

I'd already forgotten how big fireworks were when you saw them up close. I didn't remember how loud the sound was in person. Did the smell of gunpowder fill the area? How long did the smoke hang in the air? How did the people look when they watched the show? As I considered each of these points, I realized I knew almost nothing about fireworks.

The temptation to look out the window swept over me, but I couldn't debase myself like that with Miyagi watching. If I did, she would probably say something like "If you want to see the fireworks that badly, why don't you just go watch?" And what would I say in response? Was I going to admit I would be too distracted by worrying about other people looking at me?

Why did I care about what other people were looking at, when I had so little time left to live?

Miyagi crossed in front of me—practically mocking my silent battle against temptation—opened the screen, and leaned out the window frame so she could watch the pyrotechnic display. It seemed as if she was marveling at something rare and strange, rather than taking in the wondrous beauty of it. Whatever the source of it was, she had some kind of interest in the show.

"Oh, really? You're gonna watch that, Miss Monitor? What if I just run out while you're not looking?"

Without taking her eyes off the fireworks, Miyagi snarked, "Did you want me to keep an eye on you?"

"Nope. In fact, I want you to go away. It's hard to do anything with you watching."

“I see. You must feel quite a lot of guilt, then. Just so you know…if you run away and get beyond a certain distance from me, that will be seen as a sign of intent to cause trouble for others, and your remaining life will be subtracted so that you die. Be careful.”

“How much distance are we talking about?”

“It’s not an exact rule. I suppose it would be about a hundred yards.”

I wish she’d said that earlier.

“I’ll be careful,” I told her.

There was a series of quick pops in the sky. The fireworks display was heading into its climax, it seemed. The clamor from the room next door had quieted down. Maybe they’d gone out to see the show.

At last, Miyagi began to talk about the things that “might have happened.”

“Now, about your lost thirty years… First, your college life ends shortly,” she said. “You make enough money to get by, read books, listen to music, and sleep—nothing else. Your days are empty and interchangeable, until it’s hard to even distinguish one from another. Once that happens, they will simply fly by. You graduate college without having gained anything of true substance, and ironically, you end up in the line of work you despised the most when you were younger and full of hope. If only you had given up and accepted the simple truth back then. Instead, you were unable to get over your memory of the time you were ‘special,’ and your belief that this isn’t the place you really belong prevents you from ever settling in. You go back and forth from home to work every day with dead eyes, working yourself to the bone, without the ability to think about anything else, until the only pleasure you have left in life is drinking. Your ambition to be great and important one day fades, and you lead a life completely adrift from the ideal adulthood you envisioned as a child.”

“Doesn’t sound that out of the ordinary,” I interrupted.

“True, it is not an uncommon story. It is a very commonplace despair. But the suffering that people take from it is what varies. You were a person who needed to be better than everyone else. And without a partner to help you find mental solace, you had to support your entire world by yourself. When that solitary pillar breaks, the agony that results is plenty enough to drive you to destruction.”

“Destruction?” I repeated.

“The next thing you know, you’re heading into your late thirties. In your solitude, the only hobby you have is riding a motorcycle around without a destination. But as you know, motorcycles are dangerous. Especially when the person riding it has largely given up on his own life… The silver lining is that you don’t hit a car some innocent person was driving or run over a

pedestrian. You merely fall off the bike on your own. But as a result of that accident, you lose half of your face, the ability to walk, and most of your fingers."

It was easy to parse the meaning of "losing half of your face" but very hard to actually imagine it.

It probably meant I was in such a horrific state, the only thing anyone might recognize is "the place where my face was."

"You considered your appearance to be one of your better points, so this leads you to consider making the ultimate decision. But you are unable to take that final plunge. You can't give up that last little drop of hope—the hope that someday, somehow, something good might happen. It's a wish no one can take away from you…but that's all it is. It's a kind of devil's proof. You will live on this feeble hope until the age of fifty—but without anything to show for it, you finally fall apart and die alone. Unloved and unremembered by anyone. And to the very last moment, you will lament, 'It wasn't supposed to be like this.'"

It was a very strange thing. I found I completely accepted and believed what she told me.

"So what do you think?"

"Let's see. First of all, I'm very glad I decided to sell off those extra thirty years," I replied. I wasn't just acting tough. After all, what Miyagi called "what might have happened" was now "what would never happen."

"But I do wish I hadn't bothered with the three months and just sold down to three days."

"You can still do that," Miyagi said. "You can sell your life span two more times."

"Once I'm down to three days, you won't be hanging around me anymore, right?"

"That's correct. If you really dislike me that much, that is an option you can choose."

"I'll keep it in mind," I said.

As a matter of fact, given that I had no hope with three months left to live, the wiser choice seemed to be selling off everything but the last three days. But I held off on doing so, because even now, I had that hope, that devil's proof, whispering, "Still, something good might happen for you."

The three months ahead of me were completely distinct from the lost thirty years Miyagi told me about. The future wasn't set in stone. Maybe something good *would* happen. Perhaps I would experience something that made me glad I kept living.

The chances weren't zero.

And that meant I couldn't yet give in to the allure of death.

I woke up to the sound of rain in the middle of the night. The patter of droplets spilling onto the ground from the broken rain gutter was unavoidable. I checked my clock and saw that it was after three o'clock in the morning.

A sweet scent hung in the air. It was something I hadn't smelled in a while, so I found it quite difficult to identify what it was: women's shampoo.

By the process of elimination, it had to belong to Miyagi. All I could assume was that while I was asleep, Miyagi had washed up.

But I found that conclusion very hard to accept. Not to brag, but I always slept so lightly that I might as well have been dozing. I woke up at the slightest sounds, like the newspaper being delivered or footsteps from upstairs. It didn't make sense that I wouldn't wake up at all while Miyagi was showering. Maybe it had been lost in the sound of the rain.

I decided to accept the conclusion. It was strange to know that a girl I'd just met had taken a shower in my own living space, but I chose not to think about it. Besides, I needed to get my sleep for tomorrow. Awake in the middle of the night during the rain, I had nothing to do.

But I wasn't going to fall back to sleep on my own, so I decided to enlist the help of music. I put one of the CDs I didn't sell, *Please Mr. Lostman*, into the player near my pillow, then listened with headphones. It was a pet theory of mine that anyone who would listen to *Please Mr. Lostman* on a sleepless night would not lead a proper life. I used this music to forgive myself for being unable to fit into the world, and for not trying, either.

Maybe now I was paying the tab for that choice.

6.

The Person Who Changed, the Person Who Couldn't

The rain was still falling in the morning. It was strong enough to be an excuse not to do anything after waking up. But it did give me plenty of time to think about what to do next.

I stared at my bucket list. Miyagi came over and asked, "How do you plan to spend today?" I was used to hearing bad news from her, so I steeled myself to not react, regardless of whatever she might tell me. But Miyagi only stared at the list. Apparently, it was just a simple question.

In the light of the morning, I considered Miyagi again.

As I had noticed from the very first time I met her, Miyagi had a fairly pleasing appearance.

In fact, let me be clear. Physically (and strictly physically), she was *exactly* my type. Cool, calm eyes; a gloomy brow; pursed lips; a well-shaped head; soft hair; tense fingers; thin, white thighs—once I got started listing the features I liked, I would never stop.

That was why I felt so badly self-conscious about my every action from the moment she appeared at my apartment. In the presence of a girl who matched all my favorite features, I couldn't even yawn for fear of looking foolish. I wanted to hide every sloppy expression and exhalation from her.

If my monitor had been an ugly, fat, slovenly middle-aged man rather than a girl, I would have relaxed and been able to think honestly about what I wanted to do. But with Miyagi here around me, I felt especially ashamed of my twisted desires and pathetic hopes.

"This is purely for my own curiosity," said Miyagi, "but are the things written on this list what you truly, personally want to do?"

"I was just wondering that myself."

"I hate to say this, but to me, this looks like a list of things you think someone else is likely to try doing before he dies."

"You might be right," I admitted. "The truth is, I might not really want to do a single thing before I die. But I can't just do nothing, so I'm copying someone else."

"Even still, I would think there's a way that's better suited to you," Miyagi said enigmatically, then returned to her usual location.

Later that morning, I arrived at a conclusion.

I needed to be truer to those twisted desires and pathetic hopes. I needed to be crasser, more self-interested, more vulgar, and truer to my base instincts over these last three months.

What did I even have to lose at this point? There was nothing for me to preserve or protect.

I glanced at my bucket list again, summoned my willpower, and called someone I knew.

This person answered after a few rings.

The rain was over by the time I reached the train station, umbrella in hand—another perfect example of what massively horrible timing I had. With the earlier rain simply gone and replaced by blue skies, the umbrella I carried around felt as superfluous and out of place as if I were walking down the street on ice skates.

The wet asphalt gleamed in the sun. I went into the station to escape the heat, but it wasn't any cooler in there, either.

It had been a while since I last rode a train. I entered the waiting area of the platform, bought a cola at the vending machine next to the trash can, then sat down and finished the drink in three gulps. Miyagi bought a mineral water and drank it, eyes closed.

The sky was visible through the windows. A faint rainbow hung in the distance.

I'd completely forgotten that was a thing. I knew—should have known—what a rainbow was, when they happened, and how people reacted to them. But the most basic fact of all, that they were things that existed, seemed to have completely left my mind at some point.

As I stared at it with new eyes, I realized something for the first time. I could see about five colors in that massive band of light spanning the sky—two short of the proper seven. Red, yellow, green, blue, purple. Which ones was I missing? I had to envision an imaginary paint palette to recall that it was orange and indigo.

"Yes, you probably should look at it closely," said Miyagi at my side. "This could be the last rainbow you ever see."

"True," I said. "And I might never use this waiting area again, and I might never drink another cola, and this could be the last time I ever toss an empty can."

I hurled the soda can at a light-blue trash bin. The clinking sound was loud in the waiting area.

“Everything could be the last time. But it was that way long before I sold my life span,” I said. On the inside, however, Miyagi’s words filled me with alarm.

Rainbows and waiting rooms and empty cans were one thing. But how many times would I get to listen to a CD between now and my death? How many books could I read? How many cigarettes could I smoke?

Those thoughts left me feeling shaken.

Dying meant doing nothing ever again but being dead.

A fifteen-minute bus ride after getting off the train brought me to the restaurant where I was going to meet Naruse.

Naruse was a friend from high school. He was of average height, or perhaps just under average, and his facial features were a bit too chiseled. He was a quick thinker and had a charismatic conversational style, so people liked him. Thinking back on it now, it was strange he was friends with an outcast like me.

We had one thing in common: the ability to laugh off most of the stuff that happened in the world. In high school, we’d hang out at a fast food place for hours and make fun of every little thing, to the point where it was a bit tasteless.

I wanted to laugh off everything again, like we used to do. That was my first goal.

But there was another thing I was hoping to accomplish by meeting with him today.

While I waited for Naruse to arrive, Miyagi sat in a seat along the aisle. She gazed at me from a very close distance. Sometimes our eyes would meet, but she did not react in any way.

No matter where I went, I had Miyagi following me and staring at me—and my hope was that Naruse would notice this and misinterpret what it meant.

I’ll admit that this was about as pathetic as it could possibly be. But it’s what I wanted to do, so I was going to do it. Sad as it is to admit, after selling off the rest of my life, that was the first thing I thought of that I wanted to do, deep down.

“Hey, Miss Monitor,” I said to Miyagi.

“What is it?”

I scratched the back of my neck and said, “I’ve got a favor to ask…”

I was going to ask her to evade or disregard anything the man coming to visit me might ask, but just then, a waitress came to our table, beaming.

“Pardon me. Do you know what you’d like?” she asked.

I had no choice but to order a coffee. Since the waitress was asking, I checked with Miyagi, just in case.

"You don't want anything?"

Miyagi made an awkward face and said, "Um…you probably shouldn't talk to me in the presence of others."

"Why, is there something bad about that?"

"As I believe I explained right at the start, which you ought to remember…the existence of monitors like me cannot be detected by anyone other than the person being monitored. Just like this."

Miyagi reached out and grabbed the waitress's sleeve and shook it a little. As she claimed, the waitress had no reaction whatsoever.

"Every influence I might potentially have on another person is resolved with no effect," Miyagi said, picking up her glass. "So if I lift this up, she doesn't even see the glass floating in the air. She doesn't think it vanished; she doesn't see it still sitting on the table. Whatever happens, it has no effect on her. She doesn't sense my existence as being present, and she doesn't even sense me as being absent…but for one exception. That is when the only person who *can* see me, the observation target, interacts with me. Unfortunately, while I myself can be made to have no effect on others, the same does not apply to your actions in observance of me… In other words, Mr. Kusunoki, she saw you speaking into empty space."

I glanced at the waitress. She was looking at me like I was crazy.

A few minutes later, I was sipping the coffee she brought out and thinking of simply going back home when I was done, before Naruse arrived. I probably would have done so if he'd arrived just a minute or two later. But before I could make up my mind for good, I saw him coming through the door. I had no choice but to beckon him over.

When he sat down, he made an overblown show of being happy to see me. Sure enough, he showed no sign of noticing Miyagi sitting next to me.

"Man, it's been ages. How have you been?" Naruse asked.

"Oh, you know. Pretty good."

That's not really the kind of thing you should say when you're dying in less than half a year, I reflected.

By the time we were done catching up, it was as if we were back in high school again. I don't even remember exactly what we talked about, but the topics weren't important. The point of our conversation was to break things down through our grammar and syntax. We chatted and laughed about things so trivial we forgot them as soon as the words were gone.

I didn't speak a word about my remaining life. For one thing, I had no idea if he would believe me, and I didn't want to make our meeting a downer. If Naruse knew I was going to die in less than half a year, he would be careful and try not to upset me. He'd hold back on his jokes and feel compelled to offer some kind of verbal reassurance or comfort. I didn't want him to worry about nonsense like that.

I probably would have had a good time for the duration, except for that *one thing* he said.

"By the way, Kusunoki," Naruse said, suddenly recalling something. "Are you still drawing?"

"No," I replied at once. Then I realized that reply was too abrupt. "Since I started college…I haven't drawn anything at all."

"I figured." Naruse said with a chuckle. "If you were still drawing, I'd be worried about you, man."

That was the end of it.

Even I knew it was crazy, but that little snippet of conversation, lasting less than ten seconds, was enough to completely eliminate all the affection I'd built up for Naruse over three whole years.

Just like that. It was so fragile, so weak.

He threw in a few more jokes to brush past the topic, but I said nothing. I only thought.

Hey, Naruse.

That was the one thing you shouldn't have laughed about.

I know I admitted it myself. But that does not make it okay for you to laugh about it, too.

I thought if anyone might actually understand, it was you.

The smile on my face directed at Naruse slowly became a mask, an empty shell. I lit up a cigarette and began to murmur "Uh-huh" to all his comments, rather than trading words back and forth.

To my side, Miyagi said, "Now…let's check the answer."

I shook my head, almost imperceptibly, but she continued anyway.

"You're a little disgusted with Naruse now, but as a matter of fact, Naruse does not like you as much as you think, either. Originally, two years from now, you would meet with him in a similar manner as this and get into an argument over something trivial, an argument so bad that you would never speak again… You should probably break this off before too long. Nothing good will come of putting your hopes in him."

The reason I lashed out at Miyagi was not because she insulted my friend. It wasn't because she told me something I didn't want to know, and it wasn't because I was upset by her acerbic tone. It wasn't even because my

anger at Naruse for laughing at my old dream was unfairly turned against Miyagi.

So what was I mad about? It's a difficult question to answer. I had Naruse blathering on about vapid topics across from me, Miyagi muttering gloomy proclamations into one ear, a pair of young women on the other side conversing in high-pitched exclamations, a group of theater nerds having a heated and extremely pretentious debate behind me, and a cluster of students in the corner clapping and shouting as a group—and it suddenly became unbearable.

Shut up, I thought. *Do you have to talk so* loud*?*

The next moment, I threw the glass in my hand against the wall on Miyagi's side.

It was much louder than I expected, and the glass shattered and sprayed, but it only caused the restaurant to fall quiet for a moment before getting just as loud soon after. Naruse stared at me in shock. I saw an employee rushing over. Miyagi sighed with exasperation.

What the hell am I doing?

I placed a few thousand-yen bills on the table and scampered out of the building.

While I was riding the bus back to the train station, I stared out the window and saw a dilapidated old batting center. I hit the stop request button and got off the bus so I could swing at about three hundred pitches. By the time I set down the bat, my hands were numb and bleeding, and I was sweating like a pig.

I bought a Pocari Sweat at the vending machine, sat down on the bench, and drank the sports drink slowly, watching the men in the other cages who had stopped in to swing on their way home from work. Perhaps it was just the lights, but the overall color palette of everything seemed strangely blue.

I didn't regret leaving Naruse behind like that. By now, I felt skeptical of the idea that I was ever really fond of him to begin with. Perhaps I didn't even like Naruse for who he was; I just loved myself through the lens of another person who would affirm and reflect my own ideas.

And with the passage of time, Naruse changed, and I couldn't.

If either of us was right, it was probably him.

I left the batting cages and walked to the station. A train pulled up as soon as I reached the platform. It was packed with teenagers coming home from after-school club activities, and I suddenly felt much older. I closed my eyes and focused on the sound of the train.

It was already night. I stopped at a convenience store on the way home. There were a number of large moths in the parking lot, none of which showed signs of movement. I took some beer and snacks to the register,

where a pair of male and female college students in tracksuits and sandals were buying the same thing.

When I got home, I heated up some canned barbecue meat and spring onions and drank beer as I ate them. I wondered how many more pints of beer I'd drink before I died, and for some reason, it started to taste even better.

"Hey, Monitor," I called out to Miyagi. "I'm sorry for what I did earlier. I think my mind got all confused. Sometimes I just snap and do things like that."

"Yes, I know," replied Miyagi. I sensed caution in the way she looked at me. I couldn't blame her. Anyone would feel on edge in the presence of a man who would abruptly throw a glass against the wall in the middle of a conversation.

"Are you hurt?"

"No. Unfortunately."

"Look, I feel bad about it."

"It's fine. You didn't hit me."

"When you're done writing in your observation record, you wanna have a drink?"

"…You want to get drunk with me?"

I wasn't expecting that reaction. But I had a feeling it was best to be honest at moments like this. "Sure I do. I'm lonely."

"I see. Well, I'm sorry to say that I am at work."

"Then just say that first."

"I'm sorry. I only thought it was curious. I wondered why you would ask that."

"I get lonely, just like everyone else. The other people you saw before me probably got lonely before they died, too, right?"

"I don't recall," said Miyagi.

By the time I had emptied out all the beer cans, taken a hot shower, and brushed my teeth, I felt a healthy drowsiness coming on. That was thanks to the batting cages, surely.

I turned out the lights and got into bed.

It was clear I needed to rethink some things, I realized.

Just because my death was approaching did not mean the world was going to suddenly coddle me. It would only do that for those who were already dead, if it was going to. I should have known that already, but I was unable to give up my softer wishes, so somewhere deep down, there was a part of me that had hoped things would suddenly go much easier.

7.

Ransacking the Time Capsule

When I tried to write a will, I soon realized that regardless of what I did write, I could not start unless I had an idea of who my reader would be.

I sat with a pen and a pad of paper I bought from a local stationery store and thought for a long time about what I should write. There must have been a cicada resting on the power line pole right outside my window, because it was as noisy as if the screeching was coming from inside the apartment. I could blame the cicada for my lack of progress in writing, but even after it flew off, I failed to put down a single word on paper.

Who was I hoping would read this will anyway? Words were a means of transferring information. The words I would write had to tell someone else about some invisible thing inside me.

What did I want to say, and to whom? The first answer to that question that came to mind was my childhood friend Himeno. Perhaps this will should contain my gratitude toward her and confess my love for her.

As a test, I took about an hour to write a very careful letter to her. It went like this, more or less:

> *It's really none of my business what you think of me now, but ever since that day when we were ten, I've been in love with you. The reason I made it to twenty at all was because I had memories of being near you, and the reason I won't live past twenty is because I can't stand a world where you're not around. It took my impending death for me to figure it out. In a way, I think I've been dead for a long time already. Ever since the day we were separated. Good-bye. I hope my ten-year-old self lives on at least a little longer within you.*

Upon rereading it, I figured I would never mail this letter. It was fatally flawed somehow. This wasn't what I wanted to say. And it would be impossible to accurately record what I did want to say. If I put it into words, then it would die for certain.

I think the core of what I wanted was in the last sentence of that letter: for ten-year-old me to live on a bit longer within Himeno. And if I wanted this letter to be true to that wish, perhaps it was better that I didn't write it at all. It didn't matter what I did as long as it was something physical. As

long as I put Himeno's name on the front of the letter and had my name as the sender, that would be enough. It would offer the least possibility of misinterpretation. If a blank letter was too creepy, then I could just add a single sentence: *I wanted to write you a letter*. I could also fill it with something completely harmless and ordinary and safe, without including anything about my death.

I tossed the pen onto the table and folded up the paper so Miyagi wouldn't read it, then lay back and stared at the ceiling. When was the last time I had written a letter…?

I searched back through my memories. I'd never kept up written correspondence with anyone, of course, and I didn't have anyone to send traditional holiday cards or summer greetings to since I was a child. I probably hadn't written more than a handful in my entire life.

If you removed that *one* thing from when I was seventeen, the last letter I'd written was…the summer of fourth grade.

It was the summer when I was ten. We buried a time capsule behind the gymnasium. It was a suggestion from our homeroom teacher, the one who first got me to think about the hypothetical value of life through that morality lesson.

The students all had to write a letter to stick inside the spherical capsule.

"I want you to write this message to yourself, ten years in the future," she said. "It might be difficult for you to come up with something to write about…but you can simply ask questions, if you want. Like 'Has your dream come true?' or 'Are you happy?' or 'Do you remember this?' or 'Is there anything *you* want to ask *me*?' Another thing you could do is state your hopes for yourself, such as 'Please try to make your dream come true' or 'Please try to find happiness' or 'Please don't forget about this.'"

Surely she couldn't have failed to foresee the future: that ten years later, half of those children would have abandoned their dreams, lost their happiness, and forgotten all kinds of important things.

Maybe it wasn't really a letter for our future selves, but a letter to us, in the moment we were writing it.

She also said, "At the end of the letter, I want you to write the name of the person you consider your best friend right now. You don't have to worry about what that person might think of you. If you know you like them, but you think they hate you, write their name anyway. We're going to be very careful with these letters so that no one can read them—even me. Don't worry about that."

I can't remember what I wrote to myself.

But I didn't need to remember whose name I wrote.

The time capsule was supposed to be dug up in ten years. That was now. But there was no word about it. It was possible I just didn't get contacted. But what if that wasn't the case? What if the person in charge of reaching out to everyone completely forgot about it? Or what if they were going to reach out, but it simply hadn't happened yet?

I wanted to read that letter before I died. But I wanted to do it all alone, without having to contact any of my old classmates.

"How are you going to spend your day today?" asked Miyagi when I stood up.

"Ransacking a time capsule," I replied.

It had been a year since I last returned to where I grew up. The train station was like a miserable little prefab bungalow, and everything outside of it was familiar scenery. It was a green, hilly town. The sound of the bugs and the thick smell of plants was overwhelming compared with where I lived now. Even if I concentrated, the only thing I could hear was birds and insects.

"You aren't going to sneak into the elementary schoolyard and start digging in broad daylight, are you?" asked Miyagi, who was walking behind me.

"No, of course not. I'll wait until night."

I'd gotten myself here on sheer momentum, but this town had almost nothing in the way of recreation facilities or restaurants. I hadn't thought about how to spend the hours until the sun went down. There wasn't even a convenience store within walking distance. At this rate, I should have taken a moped here; at least that would have eaten up a lot of time.

But although I had plenty of time to kill, I wasn't going to return to my parents' house. I didn't want to see anyone I knew.

"If you don't know what to do with yourself, why not visit some places from your past?" Miyagi asked, seemingly aware of exactly what I was thinking. "Somewhere you went all the time as a child but haven't visited in years, for example."

"Places from my past? The only memories I have of this town are bad ones."

"Aside from the ones relating to Himeno, you mean?"

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't bring up her name. If there's anyone I don't want to hear it from, it's you."

"I see. I'll be careful about that in the future… But if you'll pardon my intrusion, I would recommend you do not go to see anyone."

"I wasn't planning to."

"That's good," she said, her expression cold.

The sunlight seemed to pierce through skin. It was going to be a hot one. I sat on the bench outside the station and thought about what to do.

Nearby, Miyagi was applying some kind of sunblock to herself. I knew she was pale from the first time I met her, but now I was learning that she was careful to keep it that way. She was so dead serious and seemingly uninterested in appearances that this came as a surprise to me.

"No one else but me can see you, right?" I asked.

"Basically, yes."

"Is it always like that?"

"Yes, no one aside from the observation subject can see me. But as you know, there are exceptions. You probably noticed that, when I am not on monitoring duty, those who come wishing to sell their life, time, or health can see me… Why do you ask?"

"No reason. Just wondering why you care about how you look if no one can see you anyway."

To my surprise, this appeared to touch a nerve with her.

"It's just something I do for myself," she said, seemingly offended. "You take showers even when you don't have plans to meet anyone, don't you?"

I had hurt her feelings, I guessed. If she were any other girl, I would have apologized right away, but because it was Miyagi, I actually felt a bit delighted, like I'd finally gotten back at her. I wanted to praise myself for that thoughtless comment.

As I wandered, thinking, my feet took me toward the woods near the street where Himeno and I lived as kids. We played there often as children. I was a bit frustrated to realize I was doing exactly as Miyagi suggested. She had proved just how simple and predictable my actions were.

The trip took quite a while because I avoided passing near my house. I stopped by the candy store I spent a lot of time in as a kid, but the sign was removed; they had gone out of business.

I went down the road through the woods, then strayed off into the trees, until I reached my destination about five minutes later.

The abandoned bus there had played the role of a "secret fort" for Himeno and me when we were young. It was rusted over on the outside, with only a tiny bit of red paint still remaining, but it was fairly clean on the inside as long as you ignored the dust piling up on the seats and floor. You'd think there would be plenty of bugs, but there were hardly any to be seen.

I walked throughout the bus, looking for traces of our presence. But I didn't find anything of the sort. I was ready to give up and leave when I happened to glance at the driver's seat—and I saw it.

Something was written on the side of the seat in blue permanent marker. I got closer and squinted; it was an arrow. When I followed the direction it pointed, I saw another arrow.

Through a series of six arrows, I reached the back of the seat, where one of those "love umbrella" diagrams was drawn. It was the kind of thing you did as a child, where the people whose names were beneath the umbrella were meant to fall in love. When you were a kid, you put other people's names in as a prank, or your own with the person you had a secret crush on.

Of course, the names written there belonged to Himeno and me. I didn't remember drawing it, and only the two of us knew about this place, so it was obvious Himeno must have drawn it.

It put a smile on my face. *She never seemed like the type to engage in these girly things.*

I stared at the umbrella drawing for a while. Miyagi looked at it over my shoulder, too, but she wasn't offering any snarky comments.

Once I'd committed the sight to memory, I left the bus and, as I did when I was a boy, climbed up onto the roof of the vehicle via a fallen tree trunk. I cleared away the leaves and twigs from the top and lay down.

I remained there until the evening, when the cicadas began to buzz.

After a brief visit to my grandfather's grave, it was night when I headed for the elementary school. I borrowed a shovel from the toolshed, picked out a spot in the ground behind the gymnasium that seemed right, and began to dig. The green color of the emergency exit light cast a glow around the area.

I figured I would find what I was looking for right away, but either my memory was wrong or it had already been dug up long ago, because after an hour of sweaty digging, I had not found the time capsule.

My throat was parched. After the batting cage trip yesterday, my hands were destroyed. Miyagi was jotting something down in her notebook as she watched me dig.

I stopped for a smoke break, at which point my memory returned. Yes, we had originally planned to bury it next to the tree behind the gym, but they said a new tree might be planted there soon, so the spot was changed.

Instead, I started digging behind the backstop, and within ten minutes, my shovel struck something hard. Carefully, I dug around the spherical object to avoid harming it, then pulled it out and brought it into the light. I figured it would be locked, but a simple slide opened it right up.

At first, I was just going to pull my letter out and put it right back. But after the lengths I'd gone to get it, I might as well take a look at all the

letters. I was going to die in a few months; surely this was a forgivable transgression.

I picked out one at random and checked out the "message to my future self" and "best friend" parts of it.

Once I was done, I put it back, got out my notepad, and wrote the name of the person who penned the letter, then an arrow, and then the name of their "best friend." As I continued through the letters, the list of names and arrows grew, until a kind of diagram began to form of who liked whom and who was liked by whom. Which ones were paired up, and which were one-sided?

As I suspected when I started doing this, when I finished reading all the time capsule letters, the only name that was isolated among those on my chart was my own. Not a single person chose me as their "best friend."

And no matter how closely I searched the time capsule, I could not find Himeno's letter. Perhaps she just so happened to be absent from school on the day they buried it.

If she was there, she would have written my name, I suspected. She drew a secret love umbrella for us in our hidden fort. She would have written my name and probably added a heart or two for good measure.

If only Himeno's letter had been there.

I stuck my own letter into the pocket of my jeans, then buried the time capsule again, returned the shovel to the toolshed, washed my hands and face carefully from the faucet there, and left the school grounds.

On through the night I walked, my body ragged. From behind me, Miyagi said, "Have you figured it out by now? You aren't meant to cling to your connections from the past. You've completely ignored them until now, for one thing. After Himeno transferred schools, did you ever send her a single letter? After you graduated high school, did you contact Naruse even once? Why did Wakana give up on you? Did you bother to attend your class reunion? I know this sounds harsh, but…don't you think it's awfully presumptuous of you to look to the past now?"

That pissed me off, but I had no response.

Miyagi probably had a good point. I was acting like an atheist who traveled around to different shrines and temples praying to whatever god would listen to me as soon as I found myself in need of help.

But with my past and my future both shut off from me, what was I supposed to do?

When I got to the station and looked at the timetable, I doubted my eyes. The last train had left hours ago. I rarely had to make use of the train when I lived here, but it was a shock to me that even out in the countryside, the rail service could end so early in the day.

I could've called a taxi, and there was nothing preventing me from going to my family home, but in the end, I chose to spend the night at the station. At this point, I wanted physical pain that was greater than my mental pain. If I was the right amount of sore, I could dedicate all my attention to that.

So I sat on the hard bench and closed my eyes. The sound of bugs hitting the fluorescent lights was constant. I was exhausted enough to get some sleep, but the inside of the building was surprisingly bright, and there were insects crawling on my legs, so it was not going to be pleasant.

From the bench behind me, I could hear Miyagi's pen scribbling. She was tough, I had to admit. Based on what I'd experienced in the last few days, it didn't seem as if she'd slept much, if any. At night, she apparently slept one minute, then woke for five. That was probably what a monitor had to do, but it seemed like a harsh job for a young woman.

But I wasn't sympathetic. I was just glad it wasn't my job.

8.

Inappropriate Actions

A few hours before the first train of the morning, I woke up and drank a nutrient beverage from the vending machine. My body hurt all over. The light was still dim in the sky, and the cicadas, crows, and turtledoves were busy with their morning calls.

Back inside the station, Miyagi was stretching in a seated position. It was the most human action I could remember seeing her performing.

I stared at her, still holding my bottle. Because of the humid night, she had removed her summer cardigan and placed it over her lap, exposing her thin, pale shoulders.

…I was probably in a state of confusion. Perhaps it was the fact that I was going to die in three months, perhaps it was all the crushing disappointment, perhaps it was the lack of sleep, or perhaps it was the exhaustion and pain. Perhaps it was that I liked Miyagi's looks more than I was willing to admit to myself.

It didn't matter. The only thing I knew was that I suddenly wanted to do something terrible to her. Or to be more direct, I wanted to have my way with her. I wanted to use Miyagi as a conduit to exorcise all the emotions I'd been struggling with.

It was the most inappropriate thing I could think of, and my life would undoubtedly end right then and there if I actually tried it. But so what? It would mean dying a few months early, nothing more. Better to die doing something I wanted to do. One of the items on my bucket list was *Don't hold back when you want something*.

Until now, I'd consciously kept her outside of that category, but once I allowed myself to see things this way, it seemed no one could be a more appropriate victim for this kind of desperate act than Miyagi. For whatever reason, she had the effect of stimulating my sadistic side. Because she was so proper and self-controlled at all times, the occasional glimpses of her true vulnerability caught my attention, and perhaps that made me want to expose it, to rip loose her facade. "You make yourself look so tough and in command, but in reality, you're so weak," I wanted to tell her.

When she saw me standing before her, Miyagi seemed to sense danger and took a more guarded pose.

“I’ve got a question for you,” I said.

“…Yes?”

“When a monitor observes the target performing some kind of ‘inappropriate action,’ how much of a time lag is there until the rest of his life is actually taken away?”

Miyagi’s eyes were cautious now. “Why would you ask that?”

“I want to know how long it would take until I’m dead if I attacked you right now.”

But she was not alarmed. Instead, her gaze was colder than ever, full of scorn.

“Contacting home takes only an instant. From there, it won’t be more than twenty minutes. And it is impossible to escape.”

“So I’ll have at least ten minutes, huh?” I retorted immediately.

Miyagi looked away and mumbled, “I didn’t say that…”

Silence descended between us.

Curiously, Miyagi did not attempt to run away. She just stared down at her knees.

I reached out toward her.

I figured she would lash out or insult me, but when my hand made contact with her exposed shoulder, she only froze in place and looked sad.

I would pull her down to the ground, lie on top of her, and give in to my desire. Perhaps some part of her would get hurt. Perhaps she’d have another injury above those pristine knees of hers, like the one she already had. Perhaps her already-darkened eyes would lose whatever spark of light they still contained. And when it was over, perhaps she would stare at me with disdain and offer one of her usual barbs: “Are you satisfied?”

Would I be satisfied?

What was I trying to do?

All of a sudden, the raging of my instincts faded. A powerful surge of emptiness replaced it.

The resignation on Miyagi’s face had infected me with her melancholy. I let go of her and sat down two seats away. I was ashamed of how rashly I acted.

“It’s a tough job you’ve got,” I said, “having to deal with scum like me.”

Miyagi did not look in my direction. “I’m glad you understand,” she said.

Ah yes. This is why I was only worth three hundred thousand, I thought. *I was one step away from making the most heinous mistake I could make.*

“It’s dangerous. I bet you’ve seen more than a few like me, huh? People who lose their minds at the idea of dying and take it out on their monitor.”

She slowly shook her head. “If anything, you’re on the easier side to deal with. There were many people who went to more extreme measures,” she said, offering a mitigation of my transgression.

I wanted to ask about the large wound above her knee that I’d noticed at our first meeting, but I decided not to say anything. It would be hypocritical if I suddenly turned around and pretended to be concerned about her.

Instead, I asked, “Why are you doing this job?”

“Put as simply as possible, it’s because I have no other choice.”

“Tell me the not-simple version.”

Miyagi seemed surprised by this. “I assumed you had no interest in anyone aside from Himeno.”

“That’s not true. If I didn’t find you attractive, I wouldn’t have done what I did earlier.”

“…I see. Thank you.”

“If you don’t want to talk about it, that’s all right.”

“It’s nothing I’d have to hide anyway… Let’s see. You remember that you could sell health and time in addition to life span, right?”

I nodded.

“I sold my time. About thirty years’ worth.”

Ah. I’d been wondering about that. What did “selling time” mean?

“I see. So when you sell your time…”

“Right. The majority of the monitors are people who visited that store just like you, and they chose to sell their time. The result is that I basically sold away my safety and friendships, too.”

“And you were a normal person before that point?”

“Yes. Just like you.”

I had a vague impression in my mind that Miyagi was just a naturally blunt, sarcastic, and tough-minded person. But from what she just said, it seemed as though those qualities were things Miyagi had to learn in order to survive.

“You still age, though, right? So if you sold thirty years of time, you’ll be released from this job when you’re fortysomething?”

“That’s correct. Assuming I live that long, of course,” she said with a self-deprecating chuckle.

It meant she would continue to be an invisible woman for decades to come.

“…Why did you go to such lengths to get money?”

“You have lots of questions today.”

“You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to.”

“It’s not a very interesting story.”

“It’s got to be better than mine.”

Miyagi looked at the schedule for the trains. “Well, we have plenty of time before the first train arrives,” she said, and she began to tell her story.

“I still don’t know why my mother chose to sell decades of her time in order to buy more life span. I remember she was always complaining about her life. My father left before I was born. At every opportunity, she cursed his memory, but deep down, I think she really wanted him to come back. Maybe she was trying to extend her life just so she could continue waiting. Obviously, that wouldn’t lengthen my father’s life, and it meant my mother became imperceptible to everyone—but most of all, I can’t understand the desire to wait for the man who left her with so many invisible scars. And even if she *was* doing it to wait for my father, the truth is, I don’t think she cared who it was. She just didn’t have someone else to cling to. She didn’t know anyone else who would love her like my father had… I hated my mother for being so miserable. She hated me, too. She said, ‘I wish I never gave birth to this thing’ so often, it was like her catchphrase. I remember I was six years old when she became a monitor and vanished. For the next several years, I had to live at my aunt’s house, but they didn’t like me very much, either.”

At this point, Miyagi stopped talking and became thoughtful. She wasn’t overcome with emotion, by my estimation; she was probably uncomfortable with the idea that her story could seem like a ploy to elicit sympathy.

When she resumed, it was even more frank and bloodless, as if she were describing someone else’s life.

“When I was ten, my mother died. I don’t know what the cause was, exactly—except that she was murdered by her monitoring subject. Extending your natural life span doesn’t keep you from dying of injury or illness, apparently. When I heard that, the whole thing sounded like a sham to me… The man who came to tell me about her death told me something else important, too. ‘You have a debt,’ he said. ‘Your mother left behind a massive deficit. There are only three ways you can pay that back right away. Sell your life span, time, or health.’ My mother had extended her life span by selling almost an entire life’s worth of time, but she died before she could work it off. As the person closest to her, I had to assume the debt she hadn’t finished paying. And if I couldn’t pay back the money on the spot, I had to choose one of their three options so they could take the value from me.”

“And you chose time,” I said.

“That’s right. The amount due was enough that I could pay it off by selling just about thirty years of my time… And that’s why I make a living as

a monitor. It's a dangerous and lonely job, but you learn some deep wisdom about the value of life and the way people live. By the time I've finished this debt, I think I'll be able to live my life *properly*, better than anyone. In that sense, it's not the worst job I can imagine."

She seemed to think she'd found the silver lining, but I couldn't see Miyagi's life as anything but a pure tragedy.

"I don't get it," I said. "I'd sell off that life. You're not guaranteed to even survive long enough to repay the debt, right? I mean, your mom died. Even if you make it out alive, you've already lived out the prime years of your life. I'm not trying to be sarcastic, but you said it yourself before: you're only standing at the starting line when you're done. It's a tragedy—a life of misery and indignity until it finally starts when you're forty. So it's better to sell off your life span instead."

"If my life span were worth anything close to average, I probably would have done that."

"How much was it?"

"The same as yours," Miyagi said mirthfully. "Ten thousand yen per year. I think the reason I'm harder on you than I need to be is because I can't forgive myself for only being worth that much, too. I probably see too much of myself in you. I'm sorry for always taking it out on you."

"…There's no way to say this nicely, but wouldn't it be better to die and get it over with?" I asked. "What kind of hope could you still have for the future at this point?"

"It's a good question. You're exactly right. Except the fact that I chose this instead probably means I do share my mother's blood. I'm helplessly stupid—that's what it means. Living won't do me any good, but all I can do is keep going. Maybe I'll even die the same way she did. But…you know how it goes. I just can't give up. You never know when 'something good might happen.'"

"Well, I know one guy who was slated to live for fifty years without a single fucking thing going his way," I joked.

"…So do I," Miyagi said with a smile.

I couldn't help but return it, and I lit a cigarette. Miyagi then stood up, pulled one right out of my hands, and popped it into her mouth. I moved the lighter closer, intending to ignite hers, but it had just run out of fluid and wouldn't light after several attempts.

Instead, she pointed at the one in my mouth and leaned closer. I took her meaning and leaned in, too.

When the ends of the two twitching cigarettes brushed each other, Miyagi's caught fire.

For the very first time, I saw her relax in my presence, and I had a thought.

Maybe I should strive to be the one subject she remembers being most comfortable around.

I stared across the tracks. Dawn was breaking at last.

9.

Too Good to Be True

For the next several days, I behaved myself. I didn't leave the apartment for anything other than food. I stayed inside the tiny space, arranging origami paper I bought at the stationery store and folding cranes.

Miyagi looked at the row of cranes on top of the desk and asked, "Are you folding a thousand?"

"Yep. It's exactly what it looks like."

Out of the few dozen I'd completed, she picked up a blue one, pinching its wings between her fingers and examining it with great interest.

"Are you going to make all one thousand? Why?"

"To wish for happiness for the rest of my life before I die," I claimed.

I enjoyed doing busywork with no meaning. The room soon filled with cranes of all colors—pink cranes, red cranes, orange cranes, yellow cranes, light-green cranes, dark-green cranes, light-blue cranes, dark-blue cranes, purple cranes.

The paper birds spilled over the table, blew around from the rotating standing fan, cluttered the floor, and added color to the bland tatami room.

I looked upon my handiwork with subtle satisfaction. Was there any form of prayer purer than a beautiful, meaningless act?

As I folded the cranes, I wanted to speak to Miyagi at several points, but I took pains to resist making conversation. I didn't want to turn her into a source of solace. It seemed unfair, gaining peace of mind through her.

But on the other hand, Miyagi seemed to be softening her treatment of me, bit by bit. When our eyes met, she would actually look away rather than stare holes through me. Her gaze was less like focusing on a fixed object, warmer than the initial reception she'd given me.

It might have been that she was opening up to me after our conversation at the station, but I didn't know that. Perhaps all monitors were ordered to be nicer to their subjects as the remaining time dwindled.

The most important thing was that she was only here to do her job. If I forgot about that and got carried away, I'd be sorely betrayed eventually.

It took five days, but at last the task was finished. I counted them again to be sure of the number, and as I did, I saw a few that seemed too good to

be made by me. Some nosy, helpful person must have made them while I was asleep.

I put them all on a string, creating a proper row of a thousand cranes, and hung it from my ceiling.

Now, back to the letter.

The night I finished making the cranes, I was cleaning out my jeans pockets before I washed them, and I found a folded-up letter.

It was the one I'd addressed to my "ten-years-older" self.

I'd stuck it in my pocket the night I dug up the time capsule and hadn't touched it since.

I tossed my jeans into the washing machine inside out and reread the letter, which I'd only skimmed through the first time.

This is what it said.

To myself in ten years,

I have to ask you to do something only you can do.

If I'm still a leftover ten years later, I want you to go see Himeno.

She's helpless without me…

…and I think I'm helpless without her.

I chose to show Miyagi the letter.

"Ten years ago, you were a surprisingly honest and kindhearted little boy," Miyagi said, impressed. "And what do you plan to do?"

"I'll go and see Himeno," I said. "I think I'm starting to understand just how foolish and pointless it is. And I'm well aware of how stupid it is to fixate this much on a childhood friend I haven't seen in ten years. But this is my *ten-year-old self* asking for it. Ten-year-old me wants to cherish that. Yes, it might make me hurt even more than I already do. It might fill me with even more despair. But I can't give up until I've seen and decided for myself… I just want to see her and talk to her one last time. She gave me a life, so I want to repay her with the three hundred thousand yen I got for selling my life span. Or whatever's left of what I haven't used. You're probably against that idea, but I made that money by selling my life, so I can do what I want with it, can't I?"

"I won't stop you," Miyagi said. "It's not like I don't understand that feeling."

I was taken aback, because I didn't expect her to support the suggestion.

At the time, I did not stop to carefully consider the meaning of what Miyagi said. But later on, when I thought back on her words, I comprehended them at last.

Miyagi more than understood how I felt.

She had an intensely keen knowledge of exactly how it felt. And she'd known it long before I ever did.

"I'm thinking of going to visit Himeno's house as early as tomorrow morning. She's living with her parents now, isn't she?"

"That's right. After separating from her husband, she's been relying on her family the entire time," Miyagi said, and she glanced at me in a searching way. She probably felt some resistance to the idea of talking about Himeno in my presence. She was worried I'd blow up again.

Uncharacteristically, I said, "Thank you."

"You're welcome," she replied with relief.

To explain how I knew Himeno's address after her family moved away from mine, I first have to describe the letter Himeno sent to me the summer we were seventeen.

When I read it, something felt terribly, inexplicably *wrong*.

It did not seem like a letter she would write.

The contents of the message were trivial. She wrote about how she was so busy studying for college entrance exams that she didn't have time to read any books, how she was writing this letter during her breaks between study sessions, what college she was trying to get into, and how she might try to come and visit over winter break.

They were all things a seventeen-year-old girl would write, in round, puffy letters characteristic of a teenage girl.

But that's what made them strange. It wouldn't be a big deal at all if some average seventeen-year-old girl wrote this. But it was Himeno sending me this letter. The girl I'd known was the furthest from average; she was at least as twisted and stubborn as me.

Where was the sarcasm? Where were the insults and complaints? What happened to the Himeno whose every facet was inverted? Did people really change that much by the time they were seventeen? Or was her writing just that different from her way of speaking? Had she always been earnest and ordinary when writing letters?

I never figured out suitable answers to these questions, and two weeks later, I sent back a reply that largely responded in kind. I talked about how I was busy, too, and took extra time to write back because of it, about the college I was trying to get into, and about how delighted I'd be if she visited.

I waited for her response, but nothing came the next week, or even the next month.

Himeno did not come to visit during the winter break that followed.

Had I made some kind of mistake? At the time, I thought I'd really stretched out of my comfort zone to make it clear that I wanted to see her, too.

Initially, I thought I'd done a bad job of writing back. But more likely, Himeno was already pregnant by some other guy I didn't know—a man she'd be married to at eighteen and divorced from at nineteen.

In reflection, it wasn't a very comforting memory. But at least the letter she wrote to me told me where to find her. That one thing made it a blessing.

I never intended to go back to school, but in order to know the exact lot of her house, I needed to use the computers at the library. I had already stuck the key into my moped and placed my foot on the pedal when I remembered something Miyagi had mentioned once.

"Didn't you say something about how I couldn't be more than a hundred yards from you?"

"That's right," she said. "I'm sorry, but I can't have you going off on your own… That vehicle can seat two, can't it?"

"Technically," I admitted. I'd bought the Cub 110 secondhand to ride to school. Its rear rack had been removed to attach a tandem seat instead. I didn't have a backup helmet, but nobody else could actually see Miyagi, so she couldn't get into trouble because of it.

"Then we can use that to travel if you want—assuming you don't object to taking me along with you."

"Not at all. It's fine."

I started the engine, dropped the kickstand, and pointed behind me. Miyagi pardoned herself and got onto the back seat, placing her hands around my midriff.

I drove the usual route, only slower. The morning was pleasant and nostalgic. While we headed down a long, straight stretch, I noticed a huge cumulonimbus cloud against the blue sky. The outline was clearer than usual, but it seemed empty somehow.

It had only been a few days since I visited the college, but it felt strangely distant and cold now. All the students milling around belonged to a completely different world than me, and they seemed so fortunate and happy. Even the occasional downcast individual exuding an aura of gloom seemed to be enjoying that misery, to my eyes.

I only spent enough time in the library to print out the map before I left. The cafeteria area wasn't open yet, so I bought a sweet-bean bread and cup of coffee from the vending machines and ate my breakfast in the lounge. Miyagi quietly chewed on a donut.

"Hey…this doesn't necessarily mean anything, but I'm curious—how would you spend your last few months, if you were in my situation?" I asked her.

"Hmm… I don't think I could say unless I were there," she answered, then glanced around for a bit. "Um, I know I told you this before, but it's better if you don't address me in public like this. They'll think you're a crazy person talking to yourself."

"It's fine. I am crazy."

As a matter of fact, the people in the lounge *were* giving me funny looks for chatting with the empty air. But I didn't mind. If anything, I wanted them to be suspicious of me. If I was going to slip out of everyone's memory in my last little time left, then maybe it was better to be memorable for talking to myself.

I finished my food and stood up. Miyagi excused herself and walked up to me.

"I've been thinking," she said. "About your question. And…this is going to be a very serious answer, but if I only had a few months to live, there are about three things I would absolutely want to do."

"Oh? I'd like to hear this."

"Well, they're not going to be much help to you," she cautioned. "The first is…to visit a lake. The second is to build my own grave. And third, like you, would be to go and see someone who was once important to me. That's what I'd say."

"That doesn't tell me a whole lot. Can you explain in more detail?"

"The lake is a typical lake, nothing special. I just remember the stars being unbelievably beautiful there when I was a kid. It was the most stunning thing I've ever seen in my miserable life. I'm sure there are countless examples of more awe-inspiring sights in the world, but the stars over that lake are the most beautiful thing I know."

"I see. When you say a grave…do you mean you want to buy a plot?"

"No. Basically, I just want to find, say, a great big rock and decide, 'That will be my grave.' The important thing to me is that I pick it out and that it remains my grave after I'm dead, at least for a few decades. And as for the person I care about," she said, lowering her eyes, "I'm afraid I can't tell you that."

"Got it. So it's a man, huh?"

"You could put it that way."

She clearly didn't want me to ask about it.

I considered the topic. Someone Miyagi cared about. She said she became a monitor at age ten. And it was someone she "once" cared about, so it would have to be a person Miyagi was close to before she became a monitor.

"I might get hurt, and I might be disappointed, but ultimately, I would go to him, I think. So I don't have the right to deny you what you want to do now."

"This doesn't sound like you. You get very passive when it comes to yourself," I said with a laugh.

"My own future is the only thing I know nothing about," Miyagi said.

It was almost a letdown how easily I found Himeno's house.

At first, I couldn't even believe her family lived there. It made me think it had to be someone else with the same family name, but I couldn't find the name Himeno on any other sign plates. By elimination, this had to be the place where Himeno lived.

Her old house near mine was a large, old, traditional home, which in my sense of childhood wonder seemed perfect for a family with a name that included the Japanese word for "princess." If I didn't have the map and nameplate, I would have forgotten all about this house five seconds after I turned away. It was a totally neutral and colorless cheap building.

I did not hesitate to ring the doorbell, because I already had a feeling she wasn't there. I rang it three times over a span of three minutes, but no one came to the door.

Instead, I figured someone would come home by the evening, so I chose to kill time in the area. Maybe the map I printed out at the college would show me somewhere I could hang out until nightfall. My eyes landed on the words *City Library*. After the brief visit to the college library this morning, my desire to read had been kindled.

It was a neat little library from the outside, but one step through the door made it clear what a terribly old structure it was. It had the musty smell and run-down aura of a condemned school building. Their selection of books wasn't bad, though.

For a while now, I'd been thinking about what books I might want to read before I die. Or to rephrase it, what books would be useful to me in what brief time I had left?

That was the only kind of book I wanted to read. If I spent the moments before my death on words that meant nothing to me, I'd just regret all the

time I'd spent on such books in the past. What was I even getting out of them in the first place?

Maybe my picks would be different in another month. But this time, I chose Paul Auster, Kenji Miyazawa, O. Henry, and Hemingway. Not the most intriguing of selections. Given that everything I picked up was short stories, it was probably less that I was a fan of these writers and more that I just didn't want to read something long. I wasn't sure if I had the willpower to deal with a story beyond a certain length.

While I was reading O. Henry's "The Gift of the Magi," Miyagi moved from sitting across from me to my side, peering over my hand at the page.

"You're going to monitor me *and* read at the same time?" I asked quietly.

"Something like that," she said and leaned even closer. I thought she had a very relaxing scent.

I sat in the library and read until it closed at six o'clock. Now and then I would give my eyes a rest by going outside to the smoking area for a cigarette.

It was a brand-new experience for me, reading a book with someone else. Instead of just thinking about my response to a passage, I was always conscious of how Miyagi might have felt reading the same page. The act of reading felt denser and richer.

Then I headed back to Himeno's house, but again, nobody answered the doorbell. So I waited outside her house for about an hour in case someone arrived, knowing full well that the neighbors would be suspicious. The sun went down, and the safety lights on the phone lines came on. The cigarette butts were piling up at my feet. Miyagi was watching me with reproach, so I pulled out a portable ashtray from my bag and put the butts inside.

Today was probably a bust, I decided.

I couldn't deny that a part of me was relieved that Himeno didn't show up. On the way back home, I made a wrong turn somewhere and found myself driving through a shopping area with hanging paper lanterns. It took quite a long time before I figured out that it was very close to my parents' home. I'd never traveled this route.

They were holding a summer festival at the shrine up ahead. I was feeling hungry, so I stopped the Cub in a parking lot and walked through the festival grounds and the smell of overcooked sauce, looking for whichever cart appealed to me most.

It had been ten years since I saw this festival in person. After Himeno moved away, I stopped going to any local festivals and events. As I remembered, it was still a small gathering, with only ten or fifteen carts in total. Despite that, it was lively. Places with little in the way of natural entertainment tend to get the most excited about things like this.

Buying an *okonomiyaki* and frankfurter were according to plan, but after that, I lost my mind and decided to get one item from every stand. I returned to the stone stairs with *takoyaki*, shaved ice, grilled corn, *kabayaki*, fried chicken, candy apple, chocolate-dipped banana, yakitori, fried squid, and tropical juice.

"What do you expect to do with all of that?" Miyagi asked with exasperation.

"Make my childhood dreams come true. I can't eat everything myself, so you need to help me," I said, and I got down to work. Miyagi reached hesitantly for my bag and pulled out the *kabayaki*, then said, "Thank you for the food" and began to eat the grilled eel.

By the time we got to the twelfth item, both Miyagi and I were sick of the smell of food. We were both light eaters, too. I felt as if a volleyball had been inflated inside my stomach. I was so full that I didn't want to stand up for a while. Miyagi licked the candy apple with a grumpy expression.

From atop the stone steps, you could see the entirety of the festival grounds. Stands and carts lined the narrow path to the shrine, with two rows of paper lanterns hanging over them like runway light strips that brought a low red glow to the shrine grounds. The people milling about were in high spirits… In other words, it was exactly as I remembered it from that day ten years ago.

The last time, I sat here—with Himeno—on the stone steps, watching the people walk through the grounds. I had resigned myself to the thought that we didn't have the right to join in. I was waiting for *something* that would affirm our right to exist, to make everything make sense.

That was when Himeno made a prediction. Something "great" would happen and make us "glad to be alive," ten summers later. That was also when she said that if we hadn't found marriage partners in ten years, we should get together.

Well, here I was, ten summers later. The girl who came up with the promise wasn't a leftover; she was used goods. I wasn't a leftover, either; I was going to end my life without ever going on sale.

But in the end, we had both reached this moment, and we were unclaimed.

We were alone again.

Where was Himeno now, and what was she doing?

As the buzzing of the cicadas filled the shrine, I prayed to the god there.

I realized quite a lot of time had passed. I heard Miyagi's pencil writing in her notebook nearby. The festival was nearly over, and the crowd had mostly trickled away. I looked up, gathered the trash, and slowly got to my feet.

A figure was climbing the steps.

It was too dark to see their face, but the instant I could see their outline, time stopped.

“It’s too good to be true,” people like to say.

But reality has a way of connecting things in the most ironic of ways, even if those involved never realize it.

Pure joy was buzzing through every cell in my body.

With each step she took, it was as if all the memories of her, from the day we met when we were four to the summer day she moved away when we were ten, passed through my mind, one at a time.

She had changed over the last ten years, but no matter how her appearance might evolve, I would never fail to recognize her.

Once she was close enough for us to see each other’s faces, I rasped, “Himeno.”

The woman stopped and looked at me with blank eyes.

Gradually, her expression turned to dumbfounded shock.

“…Kusunoki?” Himeno said, her voice as crystal clear as it had been the last time we met here.

10.

To My One Old Friend

I hardly remember what Himeno and I said when we were reunited. In fact, I can't even remember what she was wearing. That's how agitated I was; I just talked and talked without thinking about any of it.

It didn't matter what we discussed. As long as I said something and she replied, that was enough.

She hadn't come to watch the festival, apparently. She was here for business and happened to stop her car near the shrine, and she was walking by when she saw it. I asked her what job she was doing, but she avoided the question. She only told me that it involved dealing with people.

"I'd like to talk more, but I have to be up early tomorrow," she said with reservation, so I asked if she wanted to get a drink sometime in the near future.

Himeno agreed, but only if it was a meal instead, because she didn't drink alcohol.

We agreed to meet two nights from then and went our separate ways.

I was so full of bliss that I had completely forgotten about Miyagi.

"Good for you," she said. "I didn't foresee this happening."

"I didn't, either. It's too good to be true; it really is."

"Yes…I guess it truly does happen."

The next time I'd see Himeno was in two days. That would be the main event, I assumed.

I needed to make a variety of preparations before that point. When I got back to the apartment, I crossed off the bucket-list item about Himeno and was getting ready for bed when I said to Miyagi, "I have a bit of a strange request to make of you."

"I can't drink alcohol."

"It's not that. It's about tomorrow. If I'm going to meet Himeno, I want to take every precaution. Fortunately, it's in two days, so I have all of tomorrow to prepare. I want you to help me."

"Prepare what?"

"I don't think there's any point in keeping secrets from you, so I'll just be honest. In my twenty years of life, I've never had a proper relationship with a girl. If I hang out with Himeno, I'm afraid I might bore her or do something

inappropriate. To reduce that possibility, I want to go out on the town tomorrow to practice."

Miyagi looked stunned. She froze for several seconds.

"So…if I'm not mistaken, you want me to play the role of Himeno?"

"That's right. Can you do that for me, Miyagi?"

"Well, I don't mind, but if that's what you're thinking, there are several fatal flaws with your plan."

"You mean that nobody but me can see you?"

"Exactly," she admitted.

"That's no big deal. I couldn't care less what anyone else thinks. The only thing that matters to me is leaving a good impression on Himeno. I don't care if everyone else thinks I'm weird—it'll be worth it if Himeno likes me even a little bit."

Miyagi sighed. "Whenever it comes to Himeno, you suddenly become a very different person… But there's another problem. As you know, I don't really understand what other girls my age think. I wouldn't expect very much from me as a replacement. What Himeno finds entertaining might be a turnoff to me; what Himeno finds boring might be a thrill to me; what Himeno finds rude might be a courtesy to me. There are so many ways we could be different. So if you're hoping I'll be a good sample of the average twenty-year-old—"

"You get really negative when the topic turns to yourself, don't you?" I interrupted. "It's not a problem. From what I can tell, you're not that different from any other girl. Except that you're a little bit more attractive."

"Well…if you don't mind…then I suppose it's all right," she said nervously.

I made an appointment at a hair salon in the morning and went out to buy clothes and shoes. I couldn't go to meet Himeno in my usual torn-up jeans and smudged sneakers. I found a curated shop with a tasteful selection, where I bought a Fred Perry polo shirt and chino pants with a matching belt, and at the shoe store, I got some chocolate-brown chukka boots, all on Miyagi's advice.

"You don't need any kind of specific fashion sense. As long as it looks clean and welcoming, that's enough."

"Is that akin to saying I've got a lot to work with?" I asked.

"Take it however you like."

"Fine. I *will* take it how I like. And what I like to hear is a compliment."

"You don't actually have to say it."

When I was done shopping, I headed to the salon plenty early for my appointment. As Miyagi advised me, I simply explained, “I’m meeting someone special tomorrow,” and the stylist gave me a big grin and some practical advice as she enthusiastically cut my hair.

Without exaggeration, the new clothes and neat haircut made me look like a different person. My overgrown hair and outsized shirt had given me a much gloomier appearance than I realized. Now that they were gone, I looked like a handsome, appealing young man out of a pop video.

“You seem like a different person from who you were yesterday,” Miyagi agreed.

“Yeah. I don’t look like a guy whose life is worth ten thousand yen per year, do I?”

“No, you don’t. You strike me as a person with a happy future ahead of you.”

“Thanks. If you smile more often, you’d look like a library fairy, Miyagi.”

“…You really *are* in a good mood today.”

“I guess so.”

“What exactly is a ‘library fairy’ anyway?”

“A woman who’s intellectual and graceful.”

“You’re going to say that to Himeno, too, aren’t you?”

“No, her good qualities are completely different. I’m talking about you, Miyagi.”

Her face froze, and she said “Thank you” with a little dip of her head. “Anyway, both you and I are worth essentially nothing.”

“It’s strange, isn’t it?” I said.

We were having this conversation in an Italian restaurant off the main street, so naturally, it appeared as if I was speaking to myself. A middle-aged couple at the next table kept sneaking looks at me and whispering.

After we ate, we slipped away from the street and went down some stairs near the bridge so we could walk along the riverbank. I was so elated and buzzed from drinking that I grabbed Miyagi’s hand and swung my arms as we walked. She seemed bothered by this but let me pull her along. Any witness would only see me, performing a funny walk, but I didn’t care. I was never going to be one of the normal ones. It felt much better to go full bore in the other direction and become an eccentric.

“Go on, Mr. Drunken Kusunoki. Think of me as Himeno and try to seduce me,” said Miyagi smugly. She seemed to have gotten used to my holding her hand.

I abruptly stopped and stared directly into her eyes. “The greatest thing that ever happened to me was meeting you. And the worst thing was you

leaving… Depending on your response, this moment will either be my new best or my new worst."

"I'm amazed you can fire off such a longwinded pick-up line so quickly."

"What do you think Himeno will say?"

"Let's see. If I were Himeno," said Miyagi, putting a finger to her lips, "I think…I might say, 'What are you talking about?' and try to laugh it off."

"Okay. And if it were you?"

"…I don't know what you mean."

"I'm kidding. Don't worry about it," I said with a laugh.

"Is this what you're really like, Mr. Kusunoki? The type of person who jokes around?"

"I don't even know. I don't really trust words like *personality* and *disposition* and *nature*. They can all change with circumstances. In the long run, I think the way people actually differ is in which situations they are more likely to fall into. Everyone has this extreme belief in consistency of character, but I think it's a much shallower quality than most people like to think."

"I never expected you, of all people, would say such a thing."

"Everyone likes to assume they're the exception when it comes to these depressing things, even when it's common."

Miyagi sighed and agreed. "I suppose that's true."

When we tired of wandering around, we got on a bus at random. There were a few other passengers, but I ignored them and told Miyagi about my memories of Himeno. From there, we took another bus to an observation deck that was one of the few well-known date spots in town. About ten couples were there, arms around shoulders or even kissing. I continued my conversation with Miyagi. Strangely, I didn't feel any eyes on me. They were too absorbed in their own business to care.

"The first time I came to this place, Himeno was with me. At the top of those spiral steps, the railing near the peak of the deck is just the right height and width that kids want to climb on top of it. Himeno tried to get up there, but there was a little gap right between the railing, and she nearly fell straight down, all the way to the ground. If I hadn't been there to stop her, it really could have happened. She acted so intellectual, but she could be really careless about things like that. You had to keep an eye on her. I panicked and pulled her down, falling and scraping myself in the process. But she was strangely nice to me the rest of the day…"

I was speaking faster and faster, trying to brush aside my anxiety. Miyagi looked conflicted.

She knew quite a lot about me at this moment in time.

But there was something very important she hadn't said to me yet.

The observation deck was the perfect place to explain it, but Miyagi did not tell me.

Maybe she was just trying to allow me the best chance to dream.

* * *

The day of our meeting arrived. It was raining in the afternoon, and the train station was full of people holding umbrellas. I looked through the upstairs windows at the open space below, where all those umbrellas of different colors went different directions.

We were supposed to meet at five o'clock outside the bookstore, but ten minutes after, Himeno had not shown up. I told myself it was fine, not to panic. The rain was snarling the traffic, and unlike me, she had other stuff to do.

But I couldn't help but check my watch three times a minute.

Twenty minutes passed, which felt like an hour or two. Had either I or Himeno mistaken the proper meeting place? But she said "in front of the bookstore," and there was only one bookstore at this station. This had to be it.

At twenty-seven minutes, I was just about to leave and go search for Himeno when I saw her walking over and waving her hand. I was starting to wonder if she had only agreed to meet me as a socially acceptable way to get away from me that night, so the actual sight of her made me go weak with relief.

Even if I hadn't been waiting ten years for Himeno, I would've said her beauty was radiant. Every line and curve that made up her body seemed to be constructed to fit a perfect design and golden ratio. Nothing was in excess, and every part of her knew its role.

If I were a different person in a completely different situation, I'm sure I would have felt a strange tightness in my chest when I saw her. I knew she had left a huge hole in me that was impossible to fill. It was that feeling that said, "She'll never be mine…and doesn't that make my life a meaningless void?"

Fortunately for me, out of all the people around the station that day, I was the closest to her. The thought sent a thrill of joy deep into me.

"My bus was late from the rain," Himeno explained. "Sorry to keep you waiting. Let me buy you something."

"I'll hold it against you until later. Today was my idea, so forget about it, okay?"

I was aware that not only had my appearance changed, but so had my voice. It was about half an octave higher than usual, and to my surprise, it seemed to have found its natural range and was very pleasant to the ear.

"Hmm. So you're thinking about the next time, huh?" she said with feigned surprise as she looked me over.

"Yeah. And I'll make plans for the one after that, too."

"At least you're honest," she said with a chuckle.

That's exactly the sort of thing Himeno would say, I thought. She hadn't changed at all from the old days. When she was ten years old, she had the same sarcastic quips, buoyed by a kind of warmth in how she spoke.

We went through the tunnel and out into the street, where I opened my umbrella. Himeno slipped it out of my hand and held it between the two of us.

"You were always the one who forgot his umbrella, and you'd have to suffer under mine."

"That's right," I said and snatched it back from Himeno, then held it closer to her. "So we can do the opposite this time, right?"

"I see."

The two of us walked on, huddled under a single umbrella.

"By the way, what were you doing there the other day?" Himeno asked.

"I was looking for you," I replied.

"You liar," she said and punched my shoulder.

"It's true," I said, laughing.

I thought I was doing everything right.

My fondness for Himeno was coming through, and Himeno was returning the affection. I had no reason to doubt it.

I did not want to know what Himeno was truly thinking in her heart of hearts.

Now, let's check the answer.

We got to the restaurant, and I sat down across from Himeno. But as we talked, I made a terrible mistake. Strictly speaking, it might not have been a mistake. If I had the ability to repeat the scene over and over again, I would probably have chosen the same course of action each time. I didn't have any other option. And if my decision was a "mistake," then it wasn't one I made then. It had happened far earlier in time, well before it got to this point.

It was an error I'd committed over a long time, with great thoroughness.

But be that as it may, the "mistake" was exactly what ended up saving me.

And it also revealed to me exactly why Miyagi had been trying to convince me not to meet with Himeno.

After we ordered, I gave Himeno a very friendly, affectionate smile. She smiled back the same way. She took a drink from her glass of ice water and said, “I want to know what you’ve been doing for the last ten years, Kusunoki.” I said, “No, I want to hear you first, Himeno,” but she insisted, “You first.”

“Well, it’s not very interesting,” I prefaced, then went on to explain middle and high school. It really was nothing to write home about. That in my second year of middle school, my grades began to slip. That my once-perfect memory lost its shine year after year. That while I went to the best high school in the area for advancing to higher education, I couldn’t keep up after a while, and the college I was attending now was utterly average. That my parents complained that college was pointless unless it was famous, but I talked them into paying just the entrance fees and agreed to cover my own tuition and living expenses. That I hadn’t even held a pencil since the winter when I was seventeen.

My story was over in less than five minutes. There was essentially nothing about my life that I wanted to talk about in greater depth than that.

“So you gave up art, huh? That’s too bad… I liked your art, Kusunoki,” Himeno said. It was a very different reaction from a certain other guy I knew. “You were always drawing,” she continued. “You would have a completely neutral expression while you worked, but your work would be breathtakingly beautiful. I could never do that. I was always jealous.”

“You never, ever said that even once, back in the day.”

“I had too much of an inner rivalry with you. I didn’t have any skills other than studying, so I didn’t want to admit that you had abilities outside of getting good grades. You know…you probably didn’t realize this, but I used to take your art home with me so I could stare at it,” she said, a far-off look in her eyes.

“I felt that rivalry, too. We might have been equally good students, but at the time, you were always the one who shone and got complimented by the adults. I thought it wasn’t fair that you were smart *and* pretty.”

“I’m sure no one could have imagined I’d drop out of high school,” Himeno said casually.

“Drop out?” I said, acting surprised.

“Oh, so you didn’t know.” She smiled, her brows drooping. “I figured it would have come up at a class reunion or something.”

“I’ve never been to any elementary school reunions. I assumed you wouldn’t be there anyway.”

“Oh… Well, my story isn’t that great, either…”

Himeno went on to explain her life up until she dropped out of school, although she omitted the bit about her giving birth that I'd heard from Miyagi. What she told me was essentially that she married an older boy who had already graduated, then rushed into quitting school, but they had their differences and eventually got divorced.

"Ultimately, I was still a kid," said Himeno, smiling awkwardly. "I was unable to accept certain things at face value and move onward from there. I couldn't stand anything being incomplete, so I just fundamentally ruined them instead. I don't think anything in my brain has changed since the summer I was ten years old and my family moved away from yours… I think I really was a smart kid, ten years ago. But it caused me to develop this weird arrogance that said I didn't need to grow any further. I still can't manage to move beyond who that dreaming little ten-year-old girl used to be. Even while everyone else is evolving around me."

She looked at her hands on the table like a hurt child.

"What about you, Kusunoki? I bet you've changed in the last ten years, haven't you?" she asked. I was starting to lose my cool.

"You're not the only one who couldn't grow," I insisted. "I've been stuck ever since the day we were separated. For years and years, I've lived a lonely existence without a real reason to go on. It's like the world only existed to let me down. Like I was half-dead the entire time. And then a few days ago…"

I knew what I was on the verge of saying. And I had an idea how it would strike Himeno. I knew full well what a foolish thing I was about to do.

But I couldn't stop myself.

"I sold my life span away. Just ten thousand yen for each year of it," I told her.

Confusion crossed Himeno's face, but I couldn't stem the emerging flood of words. I hurled out the tangled mess that was stopping up my brain.

I told her one thing after another. About the store that paid me for my life span. That I thought I'd get a few million yen per year, but it was only ten thousand, the lowest possible amount. That I gave up on the future and sold off all but three months of time. That I'd been plagued by an invisible monitor ever since.

I spoke and spoke, intending to gain her sympathy.

"Though you can't see her, Himeno, she's right over there, right now," I said, pointing at Miyagi. "She's here. Her name is Miyagi, and although she can be kind of harsh, if you learn to talk to her, she's actually pretty sweet…"

"Listen, Kusunoki," Himeno said apologetically, "I hope you don't take this the wrong way, but—you do realize how completely unreal this all sounds, right?"

“Yeah, I know exactly how ridiculous it is.”

“Good, because it is. And yet, Kusunoki…I can’t bring myself to think you’re lying to me. Including the part about only having a short time left to live and a girl monitoring you nearby. We’ve known each other for years, so I would know right away if you were trying to deceive me. It’s hard to believe your story, but I can do it. I can believe you sold your life away for money.”

It’s almost impossible for me to describe the joy I felt in that moment.

“I feel bad for holding back on this…but to tell the truth, there’s something I hid from you, too,” Himeno said, clearing her throat. She pressed her handkerchief to her mouth and stood up.

“Excuse me. Let’s talk more about this after we’re done eating,” she said, then walked away.

In my ignorance, I thought she was heading to the bathroom to fix her makeup. Our food arrived, and I waited for Himeno to return. I couldn’t wait to resume our conversation.

Himeno did not return.

She was taking so long, I started to worry she might have gotten light-headed and fainted. I asked Miyagi, “Do you mind going to look in the women’s bathroom? I think something might have happened to Himeno.”

Miyagi nodded and walked off.

She came back a few minutes later and told me Himeno was gone.

I stood up and did a sweep of the restaurant, but I didn’t find her anywhere.

Then I gave up and returned to sit in front of my now-cold food. It felt as if all the strength was draining out of my body. Something heavy and unpleasant pulsed from the bottom of my stomach. My throat was bone-dry and slightly sore. I reached for my glass, but my eyes couldn’t focus, and I spilled water on the tabletop.

Slowly, I ate my cold pasta.

After a while, Miyagi sat across from me.

She began to chow down on Himeno’s pasta. “It’s still good cold,” she said.

I didn’t say anything.

At the end of the meal, I still didn’t know how the food tasted. I asked Miyagi, “Be honest with me. Why do you think Himeno walked out?”

Miyagi replied, “It’s probably because she thought you were insane.”

That was true, in a sense.

But the truth was a bit more complex, and Miyagi was aware of that.

She hid the answer. For my sake.

I paid at the register and was leaving the restaurant when someone called for me. I turned around to see the waiter handing me something.

"Your fellow guest asked me to give this to you."

It was a letter, something that appeared to have been ripped out of a small notebook.

I took my time and read the message.

By the end, I knew Miyagi had been lying to me the entire time.

"You knew about this all along, and you hid it from me?" I asked.

Miyagi did not look up. "I did. I'm sorry."

"You don't have to apologize. You allowed me to dream of something nice for once."

If anyone should apologize, it was me. But I didn't have the energy left to admit my fault.

"And in my original life, the one I should have led, Himeno's goal would have been met. Isn't that right?"

"That's right," Miyagi said. "Himeno was going to do it right in front of you."

Just to get back at me.

To exorcise her years of hatred.

I looked at the letter again.

This is what it said.

To my one old friend,

The truth is, I was going to die while you watched.

I was going to have you wait at the bottom of that observation deck and fall right next to you.

You might not realize it, but I have always loathed you.

You never answered my cries for help, and yet now you show up out of the blue. I hate you.

Once I became irreplaceable to you, I was planning to die. Just to show you.

But I can see that the last ten years have driven you much more insane than me.

My revenge would have little point now.

Instead, I'm walking out of your life forever without a word.

Good-bye.

I hope your story about your life ending soon is true.

I'm such an idiot.

I'd been living all alone up to this point, just so I wouldn't have to feel this way.

I should have believed in my way of doing things to the bitter end.

When I reached the bridge outside the train station, I folded up Himeno's letter into a paper airplane and threw it toward the river, which gleamed in the light reflected off the buildings across the way. The plane floated in the air for a few moments until it touched the water and flowed away.

Then I pulled out the envelope of money I was planning to give to Himeno and handed the bills to people passing on the street, one at a time.

The reactions were varied. Some looked at me suspiciously; others grinned wickedly and thanked me, then ran off. Some refused the money flatly, and others asked for more.

"You can stop doing this now," said Miyagi, who had run out of patience and grabbed my sleeve.

"I'm not bothering anyone, am I?" I replied, brushing her hand away.

The envelope was empty in no time. Then I reached into my wallet for more. I passed out all the bills I had, down to the lowest thousand-yen notes.

Then, when I had no more money left to give away, I stood in the center of the flow of humanity.

People around me stared, annoyed that I was blocking the way.

I no longer had cash for a taxi or even a train ride back home, so I had no choice but to walk.

The rain started up. Miyagi pulled a blue folding umbrella out of her bag and opened it. I realized then that I'd forgotten mine in the restaurant, but I didn't care if I got drenched or caught a cold anymore.

"You're going to get wet," Miyagi said and lifted her umbrella higher. She probably meant for me to get under it.

"As you can see, I'm in a mood to be wet," I replied.

"Oh."

Then she closed the umbrella and returned it to her bag.

I walked in front, soaked to the bone, and Miyagi walked in the rear, also soaked to the bone.

"There's no need for you to walk in the rain."

"As you can see, I'm in a mood to be wet," she retorted.

Fine, then. Do whatever you like. I turned my back.

There was a bus stop with a decent amount of cover, so I got underneath to stay out of the rain. There was a street lamp curving directly overhead, flickering on and off as if it were having an epiphany.

As soon as I sat down, drowsiness stole over me. My mind wanted to sleep more than my body did.

It was probably only for a few minutes. With all the water, my body was freezing, and I woke back up.

Miyagi was asleep next to me. She had her arms around her knees, curling up as small as possible to conserve her body heat.

I pitied her, that she had to put up with this because of my idiotic actions. I got to my feet quietly, to avoid waking her, and wandered around until I found a lonely old community center. It wasn't all that clean, but there was power, and the front door and tatami room weren't locked.

Then I went back to the bench, picked up the sleeping Miyagi, and took her to the center.

She was a lighter sleeper than even me; of course she woke up.

But Miyagi pretended for me, all the way there.

The room had a strong tatami smell. There was a pile of cushions in the corner. Once I was sure they didn't have bugs, I set them out in a row on the floor and put Miyagi down on them. Then I did the same for myself and lay down next to her. Near the window was some insect-repelling incense that looked as if it had been placed there decades ago, so I lit it with my lighter.

The rain was our lullaby.

I started my usual habits before I went to sleep.

Against the back of my eyelids, I envisioned the best possible scenery.

From scratch, I built the world I wanted to live in.

I was free to imagine a time, perhaps the past or perhaps the future, full of memories that didn't exist, of some place I'd never been.

It was a practice I'd been doing ever since I was about five years old.

Perhaps this childish, fantastical habit was what prevented me from ever feeling as if I belonged.

But it was only by doing this that I could find some kind of compromise with the world.

When I woke up in the middle of the night, I was in the midst of a pleasant feeling, like the kind of hopeful dream you experience when you're in a dejected mood.

If it was just a dream, then it was a very embarrassing one.

And if it was real life, then I might as well be honest—it was the best thing I could ever hope for.

I heard someone walking across the tatami mats. When the person kneeled next to my head, I knew it was Miyagi from her scent. Even in the summer, she had a cool, crisp, clean smell, like a winter morning.

I didn't open my eyes. For whatever reason, I felt it was appropriate.

Gently, she placed her hand on my head and caressed it.

It was less than a minute in total, I think.

I thought she murmured something, but whatever it was, I couldn't hear it over the rain.

In my drowsy state, I wondered, *How much has Miyagi's presence saved me? If she wasn't around, how desperate would I be feeling right now?*

But that was all the more reason not to make things harder for her, I chided myself. She was here because it was her job. She was being kind to me because I was going to die soon. It had nothing to do with any affection for me as a person.

I couldn't let myself grasp at any more outlandish hopes. That would only drag her into misery with me. It would make her feel guiltier and make my death more unpleasant in retrospect.

I ought to behave myself and die. Go back to my meager life, self-contained and without hope for sharing it with any other human being. I would die in peace and quiet, like a cat. That was my silent decision.

The next morning, I woke to a dull and swampy heat. Outside the window, young children were performing the morning exercise routine they often did to the radio. Miyagi was already awake and tidying up the cushions as she hummed Nina Simone's "I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free."

I was still feeling sleepy, but I couldn't stay here any longer.

"Let's go home," Miyagi said.

"Yeah," I replied.

11.

An Argument for a Vending Machine Pilgrimage

It was four hours of walking from the community center until I got back to the apartment at last. The smell of my own place was comforting and familiar.

I was drenched in sweat, and my feet were blistered. I was opening the door to the changing room to take a shower when I had a sudden thought that it would be better to allow Miyagi to go first. But if I was too deferential to her, the distance Miyagi had intentionally built between us might be destroyed.

I resisted the urge to stay in the hot water and instead washed myself quickly, then got dressed and headed back to the living room. If past experience was any indication, Miyagi only had free reign to shower and eat when I was sleeping. So I decided to return to bed.

I closed my eyes and feigned sleep, then heard the quiet sounds of Miyagi going to take her shower. I was about to sit up when I heard her footsteps returning, so I quickly shut my eyes again.

"Mr. Kusunoki," she said.

I pretended not to hear her.

"Are you asleep?" she asked quietly, coming to my bedside. "I only ask, of course, because you seem to be faking it. And if so, I hope it's out of consideration for me… Sweet dreams. I will borrow your shower."

When the door to the changing room shut, I sat up and looked in the corner of the room, where she was absent. Would she sleep in that corner again today? Would she repeat that pattern of a few minutes asleep and a few minutes awake all night, in that uncomfortable position?

As a test, I sat down there, assumed her posture, and tried to nod off. But no matter how long I waited, I did not fall asleep. She returned, tapped me on the shoulder, and asked, "What are you doing over here? You should be in your bed."

"Why don't you take your own advice? Use my bed. It's crazy that you actually sleep here."

"I'm fine with being crazy. I'm used to it."

I lay down on the bed and scooted to the edge. "I'll sleep on the left side. No matter what happens, I won't trespass or look on the right side. That's

probably the perfect place to monitor me from. You're free to use it or not as you see fit, but I'm going to be sleeping right here."

That was my compromise. I had no reason to think Miyagi would accept the idea of snoozing in my bed while I stayed on the floor. And she wasn't likely to agree if I gave her the offer of simply sleeping next to me.

"Are you sleeptalking, Mr. Kusunoki?" Miyagi asked, just to be sure.

I ignored her and closed my eyes. About twenty minutes later, I could tell Miyagi had gotten into the bed next to me. Before long, I heard quiet, even breathing behind me. She must have been exhausted, too.

We shared the bed with our backs to each other. I was fully aware that my plan was totally self-serving. All I was doing was making things harder for Miyagi. She wouldn't have wanted to do this, originally. The years of toughness and experience she'd built up as a monitor could only be damaged by someone being too kind to her. Especially when it was just an arbitrary, fickle notion from a man who was about to die. Kindness like that rarely helped others; if anything, it hurt them.

But Miyagi still chose to accept my kindness, a gracious act of her own. She probably wanted to honor my attempt at generosity. Or maybe she really was just that tired.

I woke up to the reddish glow of sunset. I assumed Miyagi would have been awake for a while, but she had just woken up, too, and was sitting up, narrowing her eyes against the light. The moment our gazes met, we both looked away. After having been so deep asleep, her hair and clothes were disheveled; she looked utterly defenseless.

"I was a bit tired today," she explained. "I will sleep in my usual spot tomorrow."

She did add "But thank you," however.

I plodded along through the sunset with her. The cicadas buzzed and squealed.

Perhaps as a reaction to the incident with the bed, Miyagi seemed to be more distant than usual.

I went to withdraw what little savings I had at the convenience store and saw that the month's pay from my job had been deposited.

This would be the last of my budget, I thought. I had to use it very carefully.

After a brief look at the setting sun from the reddish-brown pedestrian bridge, I went to a beef bowl place for a cheap meal. It was the kind of restaurant where you bought a ticket from a machine that was redeemed at the counter, so Miyagi purchased her own and handed it to me so I could do it for her.

“I’ve got nothing left to do,” I said after finishing my miso soup. “I’ve done everything that was on my bucket list. What should I do now?”

“Whatever you want. You must have hobbies, right?”

“Yeah. They were listening to music and reading… But thinking about it now, those two things were a means for me to live. I used music and books to come to a compromise with the worthless life I was leading. Now that I have no need to keep going, they’re not as crucial as they used to be.”

“Then you could change the way you consume them. Now you can simply appreciate the pure beauty they hold.”

“But no matter what, it always feels off to me. There’s always a sense of isolation, like, ‘Oh, this has nothing to do with me.’ It’s like almost everything in the world is meant for people who are going to keep on living. I guess that’s obvious. Nobody makes things for people who are about to die.”

A fiftysomething man stirring his beef around nearby shot a suspicious look at the guy sitting alone and talking about death.

“Is there nothing you enjoy in a more simplistic way? For example, maybe you like looking at ruins, or counting the railroad ties as you walk along the tracks, or playing video games on systems that were abandoned a decade ago…”

“Those are very specific examples. Were there people like that who you had to monitor before?”

“Yes. There was also a person who liked to lie faceup on the bed of his pickup truck and stare at the sky. He spent the last month of his life doing that. He took the money he got from selling his life span, handed it all to an elderly person he’d never met, and said, ‘I want you to drive this truck around somewhere no one will bother you about it.’”

“Sounds very peaceful. But that might actually be the smartest way to do it, I suppose.”

“It was surprisingly enjoyable, watching the landscape shoot backward like that. It was very novel.”

I tried to imagine the scene. A blue sky on some distant, winding country road, a gentle breeze, and the vibration of the truck, on and on forever. All the memories and regrets and everything else that came to your mind, falling out onto the road to be left behind. The sensation of everything growing more distant the farther you went seemed very appropriate for a dying person.

“Could you tell me more about that? Whatever doesn’t violate workplace ethics or personal privacy is fine,” I said.

“I’ll tell you all you want to know when we get back to the apartment,” Miyagi said. “People will be suspicious if we do it here.”

On the way home, we took a big detour through a little sunflower field, around the old building at the elementary school, and past a graveyard built onto a sloping hill. There must have been some kind of event going on at the middle school, because we passed some suntanned children smelling of deodorant and insect spray.

It was a night of damp, humid air, as if the summer had been compressed into one sensation. Back at the apartment, I got onto the Cub with Miyagi, and we left again. Because we were both wearing light clothing today, I felt the softness of her body more clearly and was so distracted by it that I nearly ran a red light. My panicked braking only pressed her closer against me, and I prayed she couldn't feel how fast my heart was racing.

We went up a hill and parked close to the best vantage point over the whole neighborhood, where we bought two coffees from a vending machine and took in the night view. The residential area was below us, glowing with a humble orange light, with the city center farther in the distance.

When we got back, I brushed my teeth, climbed into bed, and listened to Miyagi. With a rhythm as if she were reading a children's storybook, she told me tales of her past monitoring subjects, as long as it did no harm. Even the most plain, featureless stories of hers gave me more comfort than any great literary work.

The next day, I resumed folding cranes with the origami paper I had left over and thought about what I should do next. Miyagi sat across from me at the table and folded them with me. Maybe you could just do this the entire time, she suggested. It wouldn't be bad to die buried in paper cranes, I said, and scooped up a handful of them and tossed them into the air. She followed my lead and scattered them over my head.

When I was tired of doing origami, I went outside for some fresh air, walked to the tobacco shop, and bought some Short Hopes, lighting one up as soon as I got outside. I was drinking another can of vending machine coffee when it hit me.

Something that was so close to me, I never saw it clearly before.

I must have murmured aloud, because Miyagi looked at me and asked, "What is it?"

"Oh, it's the stupidest thing. But I just realized this. There *is* something I can truly say I love with all my heart."

"Tell me."

"I love vending machines," I said, scratching my head in embarrassment.

"Oh," she said, clearly nonplussed. "What is it about them that you love?"

"I'm not sure. I don't think I even know. But when I was a kid, I wanted to be a vending machine."

She was absolutely dumbfounded.

“Um, just to be clear, when you say ‘vending machine,’ you mean like what you just used to buy your coffee from?”

“Yeah. But they also dispense cigarettes, umbrellas, good luck charms, grilled *onigiri*, udon noodles, ice, ice cream, hamburgers, *oden*, french fries, corned beef sandwiches, instant ramen, beer, *shochu*… Vending machines sell everything. Japan is the land of vending machines, because it’s so peaceful and orderly here.”

“And you love vending machines.”

“Exactly. You’re free to use them or just look at them. Even when I see one that has nothing inside, I’ll make sure to observe it and take in the details.”

“Hmm… That’s a very unique hobby,” Miyagi said in a weak attempt at encouragement, but it really was stupid. Utterly unproductive. A symbol of a stupid life, I could admit.

“But I feel like I might understand it,” she said, trying to be helpful.

“What, the wish to be a vending machine?” I laughed.

“No, I won’t say I get whatever that’s about. But you know—vending machines are always there. As long as you have money, they’ll give you something warm to eat or drink. There’s something very cut-and-dried, unchanging, eternal about them, I feel.”

I found this description to be somewhat moving. “Incredible. You just summed up exactly what I was trying to say.”

“Thanks,” she said, not particularly happily. “Vending machines are very important things to us monitors. They won’t ignore us the way store employees do… Anyway, I get that you love vending machines. But what is it you do, exactly?”

“That leads into another story about something I love. Every time I come to the tobacco shop like this, I think about a plotline from Paul Auster’s movie *Smoke*. The man from the cigar shop stands at the intersection in front of his store every morning and takes a picture of the exact same spot. I like that bit a lot; the way it seemed to challenge the very notion of direct *meaning* really made an impression on me. So I think I’m going to take a page out of Auggie Wren’s book and take pictures that seem meaningless. I’ll just get basic shots of vending machines, the kind you can find anywhere. The kind anyone could do.”

“I don’t know if I can explain it, either,” Miyagi said, “but I kind of like that.”

And that was the start of my vending machine pilgrimage.

At a used-goods store, I bought a rusty old gelatin silver print camera and strap, as well as ten rolls of film. That was all I needed. I knew digital cameras would be cheaper and easier to manage, but I chose this way because I was prioritizing the *feeling* of taking pictures: setting and winding the film inside the camera, then riding around on the Cub and stopping when I found a vending machine so I could take a photo.

Whenever I did, I tried my best to capture everything in the vicinity of the machine. My interest was not in the minor differences like selection of drinks or layout. I just wanted to record where the vending machine was and how it inhabited the area.

Once I started looking, I was surprised at how many more machines there were than I thought. I took several dozen photographs just in the area around my apartment building. There were always ones I missed, even on roads I traveled all the time, and the discovery of them made my heart soar. And the same vending machine looked very different in the day and at night. Some machines drew attention to themselves with bright lights that attracted bugs, while others loomed out of the darkness by illuminating only the buttons to conserve electricity.

I was aware that even in a stupid hobby like this one, there were plenty of people who did it more thoroughly and patiently than me, and I would never be able to match their ability and dedication. But I didn't care at all. This was a method that worked for me, no matter what anyone else said about it.

The first place I went at the start of the day was the development lab, and I would spend the thirty minutes' wait getting breakfast. At the end of the day, I would lay out the pictures I'd gotten back in the morning on the table with Miyagi and carefully insert each one into an album. The pictures all shared the feature of a vending machine in the center, but that commonality only made the outer differences more striking. It was like having the same person in the same posture with the same expression in the middle of every picture. The vending machine became the measure by which everything else could be judged.

The owner of the photo lab seemed to take an interest in me, with the way I brought in a roll of film containing nothing but vending machines every morning. He had lots of white hairs, was unhealthily skinny, and walked with quite a hunch for someone who was only forty. When he saw me talking cheerfully with the empty air, he spoke to me.

"So is there someone with you?"

I looked at Miyagi, and she looked at me.

"That's right. She's a girl named Miyagi. Her job is to monitor me," I said. Although she knew there was no point to it, Miyagi bowed and said, "Hello."

I didn't expect him to believe me, but the man simply said, "Ah, interesting" and took me at my word. Sometimes you came across eccentrics like this.

"And would these strange photos of yours be of this girl?" he asked.

"No, actually. They're just pictures of vending machines. She helps me when I go around looking for machines and taking pictures of them."

"And will this do something good for her, then?"

"No, it's just a hobby of mine. Miyagi is only tagging along. It's her job."

He looked totally baffled by this, so he simply said, "Well, good luck with it."

We left the store, and as Miyagi stood next to the Cub, ready to sit on the rear seat, I snapped a photo of her.

"What are you doing?" she wondered.

"Well, after what the guy just said, I thought I'd take one of you."

"Other people are only going to see it as a meaningless picture of a motorcycle."

"Nobody is ever going to think any of my photos are anything *but* meaningless," I retorted.

Of course, people like the photo developer were in the minority—for good reason, probably. One morning, I was heading out of the apartment building toward the trash collection area and was holding the door open while Miyagi put her shoes on, when the resident of the next room over came down the stairs. He was very tall and had a menacing stare. When Miyagi came out and said, "Thanks for waiting," I closed the door and said, "Okay, let's go." The man looked very displeased with me.

It was a clear, hot day with little breeze. I wandered into an area I'd never seen or even heard of, where I milled around for two hours until I finally emerged in a place I recognized, and it was once again the area where Himeno and I spent our childhood. Maybe I had a subconscious tendency to head in that direction when I got lost. Like an animal's homing instinct.

But of course, this place, too, had vending machines. I puttered around the rural roads on the Cub, taking pictures.

There was a retro ice cream machine near a candy store I visited a lot as a boy. I remember enjoying chocolate wheat puffs, candy sticks coated in roasted soybean flour, dice-sized caramels, orange chewing gum, and classic *bontan* candies. Basically, I loved anything sweet when I was young.

The shop had closed quite a while ago, it seemed, but the broken and rusted machine that had been there for years was still present. A public

phone across the street that looked more like a public toilet had been there just as long, but it was still working, at least.

On a bench in the shade of a park stuffed with weeds, Miyagi and I ate the *onigiri* we packed that morning. There were no people in the park, but there was a black cat and a brown tabby. The animals watched us from a distance, but once they determined we meant them no harm, they began to creep closer. I wished I had some food for them, but we had nothing a cat might like to eat.

"By the way, can cats see you?" I asked Miyagi.

She stood up and walked toward them. The black one ran away, while the tabby retreated a few steps to maintain distance.

"As you can tell, cats and dogs are aware of me," she said, turning back to me. "Not that it means they like me any more."

I smoked a cigarette after the meal, and Miyagi drew something in her notebook with her pencil. She was looking at the cats. They had moved to the top of the slide at some point, and she clearly enjoyed the image.

I was surprised she had this hobby. Maybe this whole time that it looked as if she was keeping an observation record, she'd simply been indulging in a habit of sketching.

"I didn't know you were interested in that," I said.

"It's surprising, isn't it?"

"Sure. But you're not that good at it."

"That's why I'm practicing. Very laudable of me, isn't it?" she said, smug for some reason.

"Will you show me what you've drawn before?"

"…Let's go on to the next one," she said, pointedly ignoring my question and returning her notebook to her bag.

Over the course of half a day, I searched through my hometown neighborhood, and I was heading toward the next area over when I stopped by the old candy shop again.

I saw someone sitting on the bench bearing the milk ad out in front of the building.

And I knew that person well.

I pulled the Cub over to the side of the street and stopped the engine, then approached the elderly woman and called out, "Hello."

Her reaction was slow. But she did hear me, because her eyes flitted in my direction. She had to be over ninety years old. Thousands of wrinkles covered her face and the hands folded on her lap. Her pure-white hair hung

limply over her face, which only made her look more like a crestfallen girl in distress.

I crouched in front of the bench and said "Hello" again. "You probably don't remember me anymore, do you?"

I took her silence to be an affirmation.

"I don't blame you. It was over ten years ago when I last visited this place."

She still didn't reply. The old woman's gaze was fixed on the ground a few yards ahead of her. I continued, undaunted.

"But I remember you quite well, actually. Not because I have an especially good memory, being young. I'm only twenty, it's true, but I've forgotten all kinds of things from the past. No matter how happy or unhappy the events were, if I don't have a reason to recall them, they just slip out of my mind over time. I think people fail to notice things like this because you forget that you've forgotten. If people could actually retain their greatest memories of the past in vivid detail, we'd all look more miserable living in the empty present. And if we kept the worst memories of the past in vivid detail, we'd look even *more* miserable living in the empty present. Everyone just says they remember these things, because it's better to pretend that you do."

She said not a word in agreement or disagreement. The old woman just sat there, as still as a scarecrow.

"The reason you exist so vividly in my uncertain memory is because you once showed favor to me. That was a very rare thing for me. In fact, ten years ago, I hardly ever thanked anyone for anything. If adults were nice to me, I just thought they had to do it and weren't acting out of true generosity… I was a little brat, yes. I suppose that's why I thought about running away. When I was eight or nine, I don't remember the exact time, I had a fight with my mother in the middle of the night and ran away from home. I don't even remember what it was about. Probably something stupid, though."

I sat next to the old woman, leaned back against the bench, and looked at the distant towers of steel and plastic, and the cumulonimbus clouds against the blue sky.

"Since I left without thinking it over first, I just killed time at the candy store. It was at night, when kids shouldn't be walking around, so you asked me, 'Don't you need to go home?' Because of the big fight with my parents, I cried when I answered. When you heard my voice, you opened the door behind the register, beckoned me inside, and gave me some sweets. A few hours later, my parents called you and asked, 'Is our son over there?' You told them, 'He is, but I'm going to pretend he isn't for the next hour' and

hung up… Maybe that meant nothing to you. But I think the fact that I still hope in my core for good things from other people is solely a result of that interaction. That's my interpretation, at least."

I asked if she would listen to my prattling for a bit longer. The old woman closed her eyes and froze. She almost seemed to be dead at this point.

"If you've forgotten about me, then you've probably forgotten about Himeno, too. She used to come to this store with me all the time… Himeno was just like a princess in a fairy tale—just like her name would suggest. If you'll forgive me saying this, she was too pretty for a town like this. The two of us were outcasts at the elementary school. They hated me because I was just a stuck-up jerk, but I think they hated Himeno because she was too different and out of place. Though I hate to say it, I have to be thankful for that. We were driven out of any groups we might have belonged to, so Himeno and I were basically two of a kind. I didn't care if any of the other kids picked on me as long as I was around Himeno. I didn't mind, because it was like I was getting the same treatment as her. As if we were the same."

With each utterance of the name Himeno, I got the impression the woman was giving the tiniest reaction.

Pleased, I continued, "In the summer of fourth grade, Himeno moved away because her father was being transferred to a different office. After that, she was steadily deified in my memory. I repeated what she once said—'If we don't find anyone else by the time we're twenty, let's be together'—and that kept me going for the last ten years. But as I learned the other day, not only did Himeno not like me, after a certain point in time she hated me enough to want me to die. She even plotted to kill herself right before my eyes. I've been thinking about what must have gone wrong…and then I had a sudden thought. Before I met her again, I dug up our class's time capsule that included letters from all the students. I shouldn't have done that, of course, but for certain reasons I can't reveal, I'm going to be dying soon, and I figured I could get away with it due to the circumstances."

Now.

Time to check the answer.

"As for the time capsule, strangely enough, Himeno's letter wasn't inside. I interpreted that to mean Himeno wasn't at school that day, but the more I think about it, the more I realize that can't be true. Our teacher took a lot of time to make the students prepare those letters. She wouldn't have buried the time capsule without someone's letter just because they happened to be absent from school on one specific day. The only answer I can think of is that someone else dug up the time capsule first and removed Himeno's

letter from it. And aside from Himeno herself, there's no one else I can imagine doing it."

I didn't have the entire image in my mind before I spoke. It was all just coming out.

But by now, it had all formed a straight line connecting the dots.

"When I was seventeen, Himeno sent me a letter. The actual contents weren't that important. As long as it said my name as the recipient and Himeno's name as the sender, that was enough. And she was not the type of person to write letters or call others under any circumstances, even if she liked them. She was even thorough enough to have put a return address on the letter—so I should have realized."

Yes.

I should have known.

"That letter was Himeno's SOS. She *was* asking me for help. Like me, she was feeling trapped, clinging to the past, so she dug up the time capsule, remembered her one and only childhood friend, and sent a message. I didn't realize what it meant, so I had no right to help her. I lost Himeno, and I deserved to lose her. She became empty, and when I found out, I did, too. Himeno's going to commit suicide soon, and my life will come to an end shortly as well… I know it's an unpleasant place to stop, but that's the end. I'm sorry to have burdened you with such a long and dark tale."

As I stood up to leave, the elderly woman said, "Good-bye" in the faintest voice.

It was the only word she said to me.

"Thank you. Good-bye," I replied, and I left the store.

I wasn't really that hurt that my one-time savior had forgotten me. I was getting used to betrayal from my memories.

At the same time, there was one possibility I'd completely missed.

As I experienced a variety of disappointments, there was one girl who remained at my side, a quiet source of emotional support.

A girl with no future, who held the same despair as I did and chose to sell her time rather than her life.

A very, very kindhearted girl who wasn't that personable but was thoughtful and compassionate in her own unique way.

And I never considered that Miyagi herself might betray me, too.

"Mr. Kusunoki? Mr. Kusunoki?"

Miyagi had learned to stop hesitating every time she put her arms around my torso when riding tandem. She tapped my side as we were

driving. I slowed down and asked, “What is it?” Out of some desire to cheer me up, I assumed, she replied, “Let me tell you a nice little secret.”

“I just remembered,” she said. “I’ve been on this road before, long ago. Way before I became a monitor… If you keep following this road for a while, then turn right somewhere and continue straight, you’ll reach the starry lake.”

“Starry lake?”

“The one I wanted to visit again before I die. I don’t know the actual name of it.”

“Oh, right, you did mention that before.”

“Didn’t I tell you? A nice little secret?”

“You’re right. It is,” I said cheerfully. “Let’s go there, then.”

“Do you have enough gas?”

“I’ll fill up along the way.”

I topped off the tank at the nearest self-service station, then followed Miyagi’s directions. It was already after eight o’clock in the evening. We went up a long mountain road, pausing for a few minutes to give the engine a break at every pullout, and after an hour and a half, we arrived at her starry lake.

After stopping at a nearby convenience store for instant cup noodles and eating them on the bench outside, I parked the Cub at the lot farther ahead, then walked a path with almost no light. Miyagi looked around at the nearby buildings with great nostalgia and often warned me to keep my head down. Out of the corner of my vision, I thought I sensed an incredible panorama of stars above, but I did as Miyagi said.

“Now, listen closely to what I tell you next,” she said. “I’m going to take the lead, so I want you to keep your eyes shut until I say it’s okay.”

“So you don’t want me to see until the moment is exactly right?”

“Yes. We came out here for the stars, so you might as well see them in the best possible conditions, right? Now…close your eyes.”

I did as she told me, and Miyagi took my hand and said, “This way,” leading carefully. Walking with my eyes closed brought to the surface all kinds of noises I didn’t hear before. The midsummer insects that initially had all blended together into one cacophony now became four distinct melodies. Bugs that buzzed low and deep, bugs that rubbed and squealed at high pitch, bugs with distinct calls like birds, and bugs that chirped unpleasantly like frogs. I could even hear the difference between the faint sound of the wind, the distant waves, and our footsteps.

“So, Mr. Kusunoki, if I was fooling you and led you somewhere completely different, what would you do?”

“What kind of a place?”

“Good question… Maybe somewhere high up and dangerous, like a cliff or a bridge.”

“I never considered that, and I don’t intend to start.”

“Why?”

“Because I can’t see any reason you would do something like that.”

“Oh,” said Miyagi, sounding disappointed.

The sensation under my feet changed from hard asphalt to sand, then abruptly to wood. We were probably on the pier. “Now stop and keep your eyes shut,” Miyagi said, and she let go of my hand. “Watch your step and lie down on your back. When you’re facing straight up, then you can look.”

I crouched down, carefully laid my back against the ground, took a breath, and opened my eyes.

What I saw before me was not the starry sky I knew.

No, that’s not the right way to put it. This night was when I first truly learned what a starry sky *was*.

I’d seen views like this in books and TV shows. There was the Summer Triangle, with a heavenly river of lights flowing through it. I understood as a general fact that it was possible to see stars as thick as paint spatter from a brush on the dark canvas of the sky.

Those media can describe colors and shapes, but no matter how accurate the information might be, it is simply impossible to imagine the sheer *size* of it.

The starry night I saw was so, so much more immense than anything I had envisioned. It was like shining snow ready to fall over me.

“I think I understand why you said you wanted to see this one more time before you die,” I said to Miyagi, who was standing nearby.

“Right?” she said with great satisfaction, looking down at me.

For a very long time after that, we lay on the pier side by side, gazing at the stars. I saw three shooting stars. I thought about what I’d wish for the next time I saw one. I didn’t want my life span back. I didn’t want to see Himeno, and I didn’t want to rewind time to do it over again. I didn’t have the willpower left to do that.

No, I’d probably wish to pass away in peace, as though falling to sleep. To ask for anything else would be presumptuous.

I didn’t even need to wonder what Miyagi would wish for. Her wish was to quit the monitoring job so that she wasn’t invisible anymore. She was ignored by every human being except for her subject, who was guaranteed to die within a year. Miyagi might be a patient person, but thirty years of that life would break her.

“Miyagi,” I said, “you lied to me for my own sake, didn’t you? By saying that Himeno hardly remembered me at all.”

She turned her head to look at me, back against the pier, and instead of answering the question, she said, “I had a childhood friend, too.”

I consulted my memory. “Is that the person you said was important to you?”

“Yes. I’m impressed you remember.”

I nodded and waited for her to explain.

Eventually, Miyagi said, “I knew someone who meant to me what Himeno did to you. We were both people who didn’t fit in. So we stuck together and made our own little codependent world. On my very first day off after I became a monitor, I went to check on him. I thought, ‘I bet he’s really beside himself that I’m not around anymore.’ I assumed he would have shut himself inside his shell, waiting for me to return… But when I saw him for the first time in a few weeks, he had completely acclimated to life without me. In fact, in less than a month since I vanished, he had seamlessly blended into the normal world, living the same way all the people who shunned us for being different did.”

She gazed back up at the sky, a mirthless smile stretched across her face.

“And I realized that to him, I was nothing more than a shackle… To be honest, I think I *wanted* him to be unhappy. I wanted him to mourn, to despair, to hide in his shell, waiting for my return that would never come and just barely breathing enough to stay alive. I didn’t want to know that he had the strength to survive on his own… I haven’t once gone to see him since. Whether he seems happy or unhappy—the knowledge would only make me sad.”

“But you still want to see him before you die, right?”

“Yes. I don’t really care about anything else. That’s the only thing I have to cling to at the very, very end.” Miyagi sat up and did her usual knee-hugging pose. “So I understand very well how you feel. Though maybe you don’t actually want anyone to.”

“That’s not true,” I said promptly. “I’m glad you do. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” she said, smiling shyly.

I got the vending machines around the lake on camera, and we went back to the apartment.

Miyagi said she was exhausted from everything today and got into my bed. There was one solitary moment when I tried to sneak a peek back at her but saw she was doing the very same thing. We immediately looked away and faced opposite directions.

I probably should have wished upon a shooting star that these days would continue for as long as possible.

The next time I woke up, Miyagi was gone.

The only thing she left behind was her notebook near the pillow.

12.

The Liar and the Little Wish

When Miyagi first came to my apartment as a monitor, I couldn't help but be conscious of her gaze. I remember thinking, *If my monitor was an ugly, fat, slovenly middle-aged man rather than a girl, I would have relaxed and been able to think honestly about what I wanted to do.*

The monitor who had come to replace Miyagi was just that. A short man with a hideous balding pattern and a face as red as a drunk's, but with pale whiskers and greasy skin. He blinked at an unnatural pace, breathed heavily through his nose, and talked with a thick voice, as if he had phlegm caught in his throat.

"Where's the usual girl?" I asked first.

"On break," the man said bluntly. "I'm her sub for today and tomorrow."

I tried to keep myself calm. Thankfully, the change didn't seem to be permanent. If I waited two days, Miyagi would come back.

"Monitors get to have vacation days, too, huh," I said.

"They're necessary. Unlike you, we've actually got to keep living after this," the man said with derision.

"Okay. That's good to hear. So the vacation is over in two days, and then it goes back to normal?"

"That's the plan at the moment," he answered.

I rubbed sleepy eyes and looked more closely at the man in the corner of my apartment. He was holding my photo album and looking through it. The one full of vending machine pictures.

"What the hell is this?" he asked me.

"Never seen a vending machine before?" I quipped.

He clicked his tongue. "I was obviously asking why you would take pictures like these."

"People who like the sky take pictures of the sky. People who like flowers take pictures of flowers. People who like trains take pictures of trains. I take these pictures because I want to. I like vending machines."

He flipped through a few more pages without much interest, then said, "It's garbage" and tossed the album back toward me. Then he looked at the profusion of origami cranes scattered around the room and sighed with very obvious annoyance.

“You’re really wasting the rest of your time with this? It’s stupid. Is there seriously nothing better you could do?”

I really wasn’t that put off by his attitude. In a certain sense, it made things easier knowing he was going to be completely direct about his thoughts. This was better than if he hugged his knees in the corner of the room and just stared at me as if he wanted to say something.

“There probably is, but if I try anything more fun than this, I won’t last,” I said with a chuckle.

He continued to complain about and disparage everything he could think of for a while. *This monitor seems to be very aggressive*, I thought.

I found out why after lunch, when I was lying in front of the fan and listening to music.

“Hey, you,” the man said. I pretended not to hear, but then he cleared his throat and said louder, “You didn’t do anything to her, did you?”

There was only one person he could mean by *her*, but I hadn’t imagined he would talk about Miyagi in that manner, so it delayed my reaction.

“You mean Miyagi?”

“Who else?” the man said, his brow furrowed with displeasure, as though he didn’t even want to hear me say her name.

All of a sudden, I felt affection for this man flooding through me.

Oh, you’re just like me.

“Wait, are you close with Miyagi?” I asked.

“…No. I didn’t say that. We can’t see each other, after all,” said the man, suddenly better behaved. “We’ve only corresponded two or three times by letter. But I was the one at the desk when she sold her time. So I’ve seen her history in plenty of detail.”

“What did you think?”

“I felt sorry for her,” the man said flatly. “She’s had a really, really unfortunate time.”

It seemed like a very honest reaction.

“My life span earned me about the same amount of money as her. Do you feel sorry for me?”

“Hell no. You’re going to die soon. You don’t matter.”

“That’s probably the right way to view it,” I agreed.

“But she sold the one thing you should never, ever sell. She was only ten at the time. She couldn’t have known what she was doing. The poor thing, she’s got to continue dealing with nihilistic people like you who are past caring about their life… But back to the topic: You didn’t do anything to mess with her, did you? Your answer might have an effect on how easy the rest of your life is.”

I decided I liked this man even more.

“I think I was pretty bad to her,” I said honestly. “I said some hurtful things, and I very nearly physically hurt her… In fact, I was close to assaulting her.”

The man’s face went pale, and he looked ready to fight me. I handed him the notebook Miyagi left behind.

“What is this?” He took it from me.

“The details are in there, I think. Miyagi forgot her observation journal. The actual subject isn’t supposed to read it, right?”

“Observation journal?” he repeated, licking his thumb and opening the cover.

“I don’t really know much about your job, and it doesn’t seem like the rules are that strict, but I wouldn’t want Miyagi to get punished for some breach of responsibility. You seem to have her back, so I’ll give it to you.”

He opened it up and flipped through the pages, quickly glancing at the contents. In two minutes, he had reached the end and said simply, “Uh-huh.”

I didn’t know what was written there. But after that point, the man had hardly another cross word for me. Miyagi probably wrote about me in friendly terms. The presence of some indirect evidence of that made me happy.

If I hadn’t gotten the idea to buy my own notebook, I probably would never have written this record down. After I left Miyagi’s book with the man, I decided I wanted my own. I went to the stationery store and bought a B5-sized Tsubame notebook and a cheap fountain pen, then thought about what I should write in it.

For the two days I had this substitute monitor around, I should do things I couldn’t with Miyagi, I decided. My first inclination was to do something self-destructive, but I had a feeling that even if I didn’t mention it when Miyagi returned, she would sense my guilt anyway. So in a more healthy sense, I decided to do something I wouldn’t want Miyagi to see.

I wrote down all the things that happened from the day I climbed the stairs in that old building and sold my life span on the fourth floor, up to today. On the first page, I wrote about the class on morals from elementary school. I already knew the next thing to include without having to think about it. The first day I wondered about the price of a life. How I thought I was going to be very important. The promise I made with Himeno. How I learned about the place that buys your life span from the guys at the used bookstore and CD shop. How I met Miyagi there.

The words flowed right out of me. I smoked cigarettes, using an empty can as an ashtray so I could focus on writing. The sound of the pen

scratching paper was pleasant to my ears. The room was hot and humid; a drop of sweat hit the paper and blotted the letters beneath it.

"What are you writing?" the man asked.

"I'm recording what happened in the last month."

"Why would you do that? So someone else can read it?"

"I don't know. I don't really care. Writing it down helps me organize it. I'm taking all the things in my head and moving them around to locations where they fit better. It's like a defrag process."

On and on I continued, into the night. My writing was far from elegant, but even I was surprised at how smoothly it all emerged from my mind.

It was after ten o'clock when the words suddenly came to a stop. I realized I wouldn't be able to write any more than that for today. I placed the fountain pen on the table and went outside for some air. The man rose as well, irritated, and followed me out.

Walking into the night without much of a destination, I heard the sound of *taiko* drums coming from somewhere. Probably someone practicing for a festival performance.

"So if you're a monitor, then you must have sold your time, too, huh?" I said, turning to the man.

"If I said yes, would you feel sympathy for me?" snorted the man.

"Yeah. I do."

He seemed surprised by that. "Well…thanks. But the truth is, I didn't sell my life span or my time or my health. I do this job because I want to do it."

"You got bad taste, then. What's so fun about it?"

"It's not fun. It's like visiting someone else's grave. I'm going to die someday, too. I want to be around for a lot of death now, while I can, so that I can accept it when it happens."

"Sounds like something an old man would think."

"No kidding. I am old," he said.

I went back to the apartment, had a beer after my bath, brushed my teeth, and was spreading out the blanket to sleep, but the adjacent room was noisy again tonight. Three or four people were talking with the window open. It seemed as if there were always people over at that place, day or night. It was a major difference from my apartment, where the only extra people who had ever set foot inside were my monitors.

I put on headphones to act as earplugs, turned off the light, and shut my eyes.

Perhaps because I had been using a part of my brain I never used, I slept eleven straight hours without once waking up.

I spent the entire next day filling the notebook with words again. The radio was covering nothing but the topic of the Koshien high school

baseball tournament. My record of events caught up to the present day by the evening.

When I let go of the pen, my fingers were shaking. The muscles of my arm and hand were screaming bloody murder, my neck was absolutely stiff, and I had a dull headache. But the feeling of accomplishment wasn't bad at all. And by recompiling my memories into words, the good ones were made easier to experience, and the bad ones easier to accept.

Then I lay on my back and stared at the ceiling. A large black stain was up there—I had no idea where it came from—and a few bent nails stuck out randomly. There was even a spiderweb in the corner.

After watching a bit of a middle school baseball game nearby, I walked around a local flea market, then went to a dining hall and ate a dinner that might as well have been table scraps.

Miyagi's coming back tomorrow, I thought.

I decided to go to bed early that night. The notebook was still open on the table, so I put it away on the bookshelf and was spreading out my bed when the monitor spoke to me.

"This is something I ask all the subjects I monitor, but—what did you use the money from selling your life on?"

"It didn't say in the observation record?"

"…I wasn't reading in detail."

"I walked around and handed it out, one bill at a time," I said. "I used just a bit on living expenses, but the majority of it I was going to give to someone in particular. Until they ran away from me, that is, so I had no choice but to distribute it to strangers instead."

"One at a time?"

"Yep. I walked around and handed out ten-thousand-yen bills, one at a time."

The man started to laugh uncontrollably.

"It's funny, right?" I said.

"No, that's not what I'm laughing at," the man said through his chortling. It was a strange sound, and it wasn't exactly mirthful. "I see… So you sold your life span away to get money, and you just handed out the majority of it, to strangers, unconditionally."

"That's about right," I said.

"You really are a complete and total idiot."

"I agree. There were plenty of more effective ways of using it. I could have done lots of things with three hundred thousand yen."

"No. *That's* not what I'm making fun of," he said. Something about the way he said it struck me as curious.

At last, he said, “Hey, listen. Tell me—you don’t seriously think your own life was worth three hundred thousand yen simply because they told you so, right?”

The question shook me to my core.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I mean exactly what I said. When they told you your life was worth three hundred thousand yen, did you say ‘Okay’ and take it?”

“Well, yeah…but I did think it was way too low at first.”

He smacked the floor and guffawed.

“Okay. Okay! Listen, I can’t really tell you anything,” he said, holding his stomach, “but when you see her tomorrow…why don’t you ask her yourself? Ask her, ‘Was the rest of my life really worth three hundred thousand?’”

I wanted to question him more about this, but he had no intention of telling me.

Instead, I stared at the pitch-black ceiling, unable to sleep.

All I did was think and think about what he said.

“Good morning, Mr. Kusunoki.”

I woke up to the light coming through the window and Miyagi’s voice.

There she was, sitting in the corner of the room, giving me a friendly smile—and lying to me.

“How do you plan to spend the day?”

I stopped the words just before they reached my throat.

Instead, I decided I should just play dumb. I didn’t want to know the truth if it would cause trouble for Miyagi.

“The usual way,” I said.

“The vending machine pilgrimage,” said Miyagi happily.

We rode along twisting country roads and past rice paddies under the blue sky, onward and onward. At a roadside rest stop, we ate salt-grilled char and soft-serve ice cream. I found a strangely desolate and shuttered-up business area with hardly any people but tons of bicycles. And before I knew it, night had arrived.

I stopped the Cub at a small dam, then descended some stairs to a little walking path.

“Where are you heading?”

I didn’t turn around. “If I was fooling you and led you somewhere completely different, what would you do?”

“Meaning you’re taking me somewhere with very beautiful scenery?” Miyagi asked with anticipation.

“You’ve misconstrued the statement,” I said, but she was right.

By the time we were crossing a little footbridge over a stream in the middle of the woods, she had figured out what I was doing.

Miyagi seemed entranced by the sight. “Um, pardon me if I’m noticing the wrong thing, but…I guess fireflies really do light up, don’t they?”

“Of course they do. Why do you think they’re called that?” I laughed, but I understood what she meant. Miyagi was feeling the same way now that I felt when looking at the stars over the lake. You know these things exist. But when they possess a beauty beyond a certain level, abstract knowledge means nothing. You don’t know it until you’ve seen it.

Slowly, we walked down the path, surrounded by a countless number of floating, blinking green lights. You had to be careful, because looking too hard at the lights might cause a loss of focus and then balance.

“I think this might be the first time I’ve ever seen fireflies,” said Miyagi.

“Their numbers have gone down a lot lately. You can’t really see them unless you go to particular places at the right time. We’ve probably only got a few more days to be able to see them here.”

“Do you come here often, Mr. Kusunoki?”

“No. Only once last year, around this time. I just remembered it yesterday.”

The peak firefly time passed, so we turned to go back the way we came.

“…May I take this to be thanks for the trip to the lake?” Miyagi asked me.

“I decided I wanted to see them, so I chose to come here. That’s all. You can interpret it however you like.”

“Very well. I *will* interpret it. I will interpret it very much.”

“You don’t have to say it.”

I drove back to the apartment, finished my daily ritual of organizing photos, prepared for bed, returned Miyagi’s “Good-night,” and had just turned out the lights when I spoke to her again.

“Miyagi.”

“What is it?”

“Why did you lie to me?”

She looked up at me and blinked. “I don’t understand what you mean.”

“Let me be more specific, then… Was my life span really worth three hundred thousand yen?”

The moon was bright enough that I could see the shift in her eyes.

“Of course it was,” she said. “I’m sorry, but that’s your worth. I thought you’d accepted that and moved on already.”

“I thought I had, too, until last night,” I told her.

Miyagi could sense that I had a reason to be certain about this. “Did the substitute monitor say something to you?” she asked, sighing.

“He just said to look into it one more time. He didn’t actually tell me any facts.”

“Well, three hundred thousand is three hundred thousand. That’s a fact,” she said. She was determined not to bite.

“…When I heard you were lying to me, my first thought was simply that you had embezzled the money I was supposed to have received.”

She stared upward at me.

“Initially, I thought the real value was thirty million yen, or three billion yen, and you pocketed nearly all of it and told me a false price… But I just couldn’t believe that. I didn’t want to think you were lying to me from the very first moment I met you. That even when you were smiling at me, there were lies underneath. I thought I must be making some fundamental mistake. So I thought about it all night, and then I figured it out… I was completely wrong about the very initial premise.”

In fact, my teacher had told me as much, ten years before this.

I want you to put aside that way of thinking for now.

“Why did I believe ten thousand yen was the lowest possible value for a year of my life? Why did I believe in the idea that you could simply sell a human life for millions or billions of yen? I had too much prior knowledge. Maybe somewhere in my heart, I still accepted the nonsense about life being the most precious thing of all. I was too comfortable in my own preconceptions. I should have approached it with a more flexible mind.”

I took a deep breath, then continued, “So tell me…why did *you* decide to give a perfect stranger three hundred thousand yen?”

Miyagi said, “I have no idea what you’re talking about” and avoided my gaze.

I moved to the corner of the room directly across from where Miyagi was sitting and put my arms around my knees, mirroring her.

This made her smile, just a little bit.

“If you’re going to pretend you don’t know, fine. But let me just say: thank you.”

Miyagi shook her head. “It’s no problem. If I keep doing this job forever, I’m going to die before I finish repaying the debt, just like my mother. And even if I finished and was free again, there’s no guarantee I’d have a good life. So it’s better that I use my money for something like this.”

“Then how much was my actual worth?” I asked.

She paused for quite a while.

“…Thirty yen,” she mumbled.

“The worth of a three-minute phone call,” I said with a laugh. “Well, sorry for using up the three hundred thousand you gave me that way.”

“You should be. I wanted you to use it for yourself,” she said. The content of her words was angry, but her voice was soft and gentle. “Though I’ll admit, I understand how you feel. The reason I gave you three hundred thousand and the reason you gave it away are probably the same thing at their core. We’re lonely and sad and empty and self-destructive, and so we turned to a kind of conceited, self-satisfied altruism… But thinking about it now, if I’d told you the truth, rather than lying about the three hundred thousand, you might not have sold your life span away. If nothing else, you might have lived longer. I’m sorry for interfering with that.”

She was curled up, her chin buried between her knees, staring at her toes.

“Maybe I just wanted, for once in my life, to be in a position to give something unconditionally to someone else. Maybe I was trying to save myself by giving to someone unfortunate in a situation similar to mine—to do something for them that no one would do for me. But ultimately, I was only forcing a heavy-handed attempt at generosity on you. I’m sorry.”

“That’s not true,” I protested. “If you had said, ‘Your value is thirty yen,’ I would have completely self-destructed. Rather than three months, I would have left less than three days. If you hadn’t lied to me, I couldn’t have gone on a tour of vending machines, folding paper cranes, stargazing, or looking for fireflies.”

“There was never any need for you to be self-destructive. Thirty yen is just a number some big shot somewhere decided on,” Miyagi claimed. “To me, at least, you’re worth thirty million or three billion yen right now.”

“That’s a weird way to try to comfort me,” I said awkwardly.

“It’s true.”

“The nicer you are, the more pathetic I feel. I already know you’re a kind person. You can stop now.”

“Shut up and let me comfort you, please.”

“…No one’s ever spoken to me quite like that before.”

“And I’m not just trying to be nice. I’m just saying what I want to say, that’s all. It doesn’t matter to me what you think about it.”

Miyagi looked down with shy embarrassment.

Then she went on. “I’ll admit, at the start, I thought you were indeed worth only thirty yen. The three hundred thousand yen was just for my own sake. I could have given it to anyone, not just you specifically… But over time, my perception of you changed. After the incident at the train station, you took my story seriously. When I told you I never had a choice in this, you sympathized. From that day on, you were no longer just my subject. That’s a major problem all on its own, but then I had more problems after that… It might not have meant anything to you, but unfortunately for me, I

was happy when you spoke to me. It made me really, really happy that you would talk to me in public, regardless of whether anyone was listening. I've always been invisible, after all. It's my job to be ignored. Talking and eating at normal restaurants, shopping together, wandering around town, walking hand in hand along the river—all these tiny, mundane things were like a dream to me. In the time I've been doing this, you are the first person to treat me like I'm *there* at all times, from start to finish, Mr. Kusunoki."

I had no idea what to say to that. I'd never considered the possibility that someone might feel gratitude toward me.

"If you want me to…I can keep doing that stuff until the day I die," I said, teasing her.

But Miyagi just nodded. "I suppose you will. It's why I like you." She smiled sadly. "I guess there's no use falling in love with someone who's going away, though."

My chest seized up. I couldn't speak.

It was as if I were a computer that had frozen. I couldn't say anything, I couldn't even blink.

"Mr. Kusunoki, I've lied to you about a lot of things," Miyagi said, her voice getting just a little bit tearful. "About more than just the price of your life and Himeno's past. Like about how I could end your life if you tried to mess with other people. That was a lie. You dying if you travel more than a hundred yards away me? Also a lie. They were just excuses to protect myself. They're all lies."

"…I had no idea."

"If you're angry, you can do whatever you want to me."

"Anything?" I repeated.

"Yes. Whatever awful things you can think of."

"Then I will."

I grabbed Miyagi by the hand, pulled her up into a standing position, and hugged her.

I don't know how long the moment lasted.

I tried to commit everything to memory. Her soft hair. Perfectly shaped ears. Slender neck. Delicate shoulders and back. The subtle swell of her chest. The gentle curve of her hip. I focused all my attention on my five senses, etching the details deep in the center of my brain, committing them to my core.

I wanted to remember them at a moment's notice. I wanted to never forget them.

"This really is cruel of you," said Miyagi, sniffling. "After this, it's going to be impossible for me to forget you."

"Yeah. You better be sad after I die," I said.

“…If that’s what you want, then I’ll be that way until I die, too.”

And Miyagi smiled.

At this point in my short and meaningless life, I finally had a goal.

What Miyagi said had a tremendously transformative effect on me.

I was going to do whatever I could with the two months I had left to repay her entire debt.

That was my plan.

A guy whose whole life is worth less than a beverage from a vending machine.

This is probably what they mean when they say you’re in over your head.

13.

A Sure Thing

My story is approaching its end. I have less and less time to spend on recording it like this. I'm not even certain I'll be able to write it all the way to its conclusion.

I'm disappointed, but the only choice I have is to record what happened in less detail.

I decided to dedicate the rest of my life to repaying Miyagi's debt, but my habit of being an idiot who didn't know what he was doing wasn't easy to fix. Still, in the rest of the story, I don't think my mistaken assumptions are really worth criticizing. I mean, the entire plan was impossible, for one. Miyagi's debt was far beyond the amount Himeno once said was the lifetime earnings of a salaryman. There was no legitimate way for an ordinary college student to earn that kind of money in two months.

But I still tried to find out. The more laudable plan of working hard and chipping away at it wasn't realistic in this case. Even working myself to the bone at a real job wasn't going to have any effect if it was only for two months. I might be able to return the three hundred thousand yen Miyagi gave me, but I didn't think she wanted me to spend the rest of my life doing hard labor just for that. Miyagi wouldn't want me to dabble in theft, burglary, fraud, or kidnapping, either. If I was making this money for her, there was no point to doing it in a way she didn't want.

I considered gambling, but I wasn't stupid enough to throw myself into that world. I knew that gambling when you were desperate was an easy guarantee that you would lose. The only people who win are the ones who have money to spare.

If you try to reach for Lady Luck, she runs away. You have to be patient, waiting and waiting for her to approach, and catch her when the timing is right. But I didn't have that much time, and my senses weren't sharp enough to catch the exact right moment.

It was like trying to catch a cloud. If there was a wonderful way to make a lifetime's worth of money in just two months, everyone would be doing it. I was trying to prove something that everyone else had already proved impossible. My only unique advantage was the knowledge that I would die soon—I had the ability to risk everything. But I wasn't the first person to

wager his life in an attempt to make a lot of money. Obviously, the vast majority of those people were not successful.

But I still thought about it. I knew it was absurd. If no one else had ever achieved this before, I would just have to be the first, I told myself. *Think, think, think. How can I pay off Miyagi's debt in the last two months? How can I assure she sleeps peacefully every night? How can I keep her from being all alone in the world after I'm gone?*

I thought and thought as I paced through the town. Twenty years of experience taught me that walking and more walking was the best way to mull over a tough question without a simple answer. I walked the next day, and the day after that, hoping that I'd stumble over the perfect answer somewhere.

During my period of contemplation, I hardly ate a bite of food. Another bit of knowledge from experience was that hunger past a certain point honed my intuition. I was relying on that now.

It wasn't that long before I landed upon the idea of visiting that business again. My last hope was the fact that I still had two opportunities to make use of the place in that crumbling building—the very place that plunged me into despair to begin with.

One day, I asked Miyagi a question. "It's thanks to you that I'm a much happier person than I ever was before. How much value do you think my life would get if I went back to that store now?"

"…As you suspect, a human's worth does fluctuate to a certain extent," Miyagi said. "But unfortunately, subjective happiness does not have much of an influence on the value of the life span. What they value is objective, measurable, metric-based happiness. Not that I think highly of that."

"In that case, what actually *does* have the most influence on the value?"

"Contributions to society, fame… Things that are very easy to determine objectively tend to be the most prized."

"Easy to determine, huh?"

"Um, Mr. Kusunoki…"

"What's up?"

"Please don't get any funny ideas." She looked worried.

"I'm not getting funny ideas. My ideas are the most natural kind there are, for this kind of situation."

"…I believe I know what you're considering," she claimed. "You're thinking of a way to pay off my debt, aren't you? If that's the case, I appreciate the thought. I really do, but I don't want you to spend the last bit of your time doing that. If you're doing it because you're wondering how to make me happy, then I'm sorry, but you're approaching this all wrong."

"Then for the sake of asking, what *does* make you happy?"

"…Interact with me," she said, almost pouting. "You haven't been talking to me much lately."

Miyagi was perfectly right. I was completely off in my way of thinking.

But I couldn't just give up on this. I was too stubborn.

Gain value that was easy to determine, like social contribution and fame. That raises the price of your life. And that was a sure thing. Or to rephrase it, you should be a great and admired person, the kind of person whose name everyone knew.

Simply making a lot of money, or becoming a person of such high value that your life span could be sold at a high price—which was a more realistic goal? I didn't know. They both seemed completely improbable. But if there were no other ways, I would have to test it out.

I was reaching the limit of what I could think about on my own. The time had come to rely on the imagination of others.

The first place I visited was the local used bookstore. I always had a tendency to go there when I was feeling troubled. As I browsed random shelves and idly picked up books that seemed unrelated to my problem, I often found a solution. This one wouldn't be that easy to solve, but it wasn't the books alone I would rely on today.

Instead, I spoke to the elderly shop owner, who was listening to a baseball game on the radio in the back, practically buried in stacks of books all around him. He looked up and murmured something noncommittal.

I decided not to mention the shop that bought and sold life span at all. For one thing, I wanted to know exactly how much he knew about the shop, and I also wanted him to hear what had happened to me in the last month. But if I talked about that, I would naturally have to broach the fact that I had less than two months to live, and that might make the man feel responsible.

So I avoided the topic of life span. For once, I acted in a way that did not let on about Miyagi's presence, and I started talking about harmless things: the weather, baseball, books, festivals. It hardly developed into any kind of conversation, but I found it to be oddly peaceful and comforting. I think I probably just liked this store and its old owner.

When Miyagi wandered away to peer at the shelves, I asked the old man quietly, "What do you think I should do to raise my value?"

After all this time talking, he finally lowered the volume of the radio and said, "Good question. I think you just have to be steady. That's something I couldn't do. I'm an old man now, and it took me this long to figure out the best way to do things. Just take each step you're able to manage, persevere little by little, and build it up that way."

"Uh-huh," I murmured.

"But," he said, preparing to erase everything he'd just said, "there's something more important. And that's to not trust the advice of people like me. Anyone who talks about success without having achieved it for himself is a loser who can't admit it. That's why they don't learn. They don't try to understand *why* they lost. You don't need to listen to those people and act like you learned something… Lots of people who have failed will talk like they know how to succeed if they just get another life, another shot. They think, 'I've been through hell and back, so I'm not going to screw it up again.' But those people—and I'm one of them—are making a fundamental mistake. A loser's got plenty of experience with failing, yes. But knowing about failure and knowing about success are completely separate things. Clawing out of your hole doesn't mean success. You're just in the gray again, where you left. That's what they don't understand."

I recalled that Miyagi had said something similar, and it struck me as being funny. *They're only standing at the* starting line*. It means that after a long losing streak of gambling, they've finally regained their wits. Nothing good comes from assuming this is your chance for a once-in-a-lifetime jackpot.*

Lastly, he said, "So you're thinking of selling your life *again*, huh?"

"What do you mean?" I said, smiling blankly.

As I did that first day, I went to the CD shop after the bookstore. The usual bleached-blond guy gave me a friendly greeting. Here, too, I avoided the topic of life span and instead stuck to some benign topics about the latest albums he was listening to.

Eventually, I waited until Miyagi wasn't quite listening to ask, "If you wanted to achieve something in a limited amount of time, what would you do?"

His response was prompt. "You'd probably need a lotta help, right? I mean, there's not much you can do on your own, ya know? So you have to rely on other people. I don't put a lot of trust in an individual's ability. If I can't solve it by applying eighty percent of my own effort, I'll go right to someone else for help."

It was tricky advice. I wasn't sure if it would be useful to me or not.

Outside, there was one of those special summer storms that sneaked in out of nowhere. I was heading out, expecting to get wet, when the blond guy stopped me and gave me a plastic umbrella.

"I'm not really sure what it is you're trying to do, but if you want to achieve anything, the first thing you'll need is your health," he said.

I thanked him, opened the umbrella, and went home with Miyagi. It was a small umbrella, so our outer shoulders got drenched. Strangers passing by

eyed me with curiosity. I must have looked like a real idiot, holding my umbrella over just one shoulder as I walked by myself.

"I like this kind of thing," Miyagi said with a laugh.

"What kind of thing?" I asked.

"Mmm, what I mean is, it might look foolish to someone else, but there's actually a very heartwarming reason that you're letting your shoulder get wet. I like it."

"Oh," I said. My face felt a little hotter.

"You're a shameless shy boy," she said, poking me on the shoulder.

At this point, I was beyond indifferent to what anyone thought about me; I actively enjoyed being treated like an eccentric. It would make Miyagi smile. And the more comical I appeared, the happier she was.

We took shelter under the overhang of some storefronts. Thunder rumbled in the distance, and the runoff flooded the drain, drenching my shoes all the way to the inside.

Then I saw a familiar face. He was walking quickly with a dark-blue umbrella, and when he saw me, he stopped.

It was a guy from my college, whom I only knew well enough to exchange greetings with.

"It's been a while," he said, his stare cold. "What have you been doing lately? I haven't seen you at school in forever."

I placed a hand on Miyagi's shoulder. "I'm just hanging out with her. Her name's Miyagi."

He wrinkled his nose in obvious distaste. "That's not funny, man. Don't be a creep."

"I don't blame you for reacting that way," I said. "If I were in your position, I'd probably do the same thing. But I can tell you all the same that Miyagi is right here. I'll respect that you don't believe me, so I'd appreciate it if you respect that I do believe it."

"…Listen, Kusunoki. I've always thought you were crazy. You never hang out with anyone; you just hide in your shell, right? Why don't you pay attention to the outside world for once?" he snapped, then walked away.

I sat down on a bench and watched the rain come down. It was just a passing shower, and the sun was soon peeking out from the clouds again. We had to squint against the shine of the light reflecting off the wet pavement.

"Um, I just want to say…thank you." Miyagi leaned against my shoulder.

I put a hand on her head and traced my fingers through her soft hair.

You just have to be steady, the owner of the used bookstore had said. I repeated it to myself. He also said he shouldn't be trusted, but at this moment, his words had meaning to me.

Perhaps I was too invested in the concept of repaying the debt. At this moment, there *was* something I could do for the sake of Miyagi's happiness. She asked me to interact with her. And even just making myself into a crazy person in public really seemed to make her happy.

If there was something I should be doing, right within arm's length, why didn't I do it?

At that very moment, practically anticipating my change of heart, Miyagi said, "Listen, Mr. Kusunoki. It makes me very, very happy that you're using what little life you have left for my sake…but you don't need to do that anymore. You've saved me. Decades after you're gone, I'm sure I'll be looking back on the time I spent with you, and I'll be crying and laughing by myself. Life will be undeniably easier for me, just from having these memories. So you don't have to keep trying. Just forget about my debt, please."

She leaned against me, allowing me to support her weight.

"Instead, give me memories. Give me as many memories as you can. Memories that will keep me warm when I can barely stand the loneliness after you're gone."

I was approaching the end of my terrible life, which was stupider than that of any person I had ever met—and ironically, the last decision I ever made was the smartest. When you reach the end of my record, you will understand this.

Miyagi and I got on a bus and headed for a park with a big pond.

Most people will either frown or burst into laughter if they hear what I did there.

I rented a boat at the dock. I could have gotten one of the simple rowboats, but I intentionally picked out the ridiculous swan boat. The employee at the dock seemed to think it was strange that I was getting one by myself, to all appearances. This was, of course, because it was always rented by couples or girlfriends.

I turned to smile at Miyagi and said, "C'mon, let's go." The employee's face twitched, and he quickly scampered away from me.

Miyagi found this to be so funny that she kept giggling the whole time we were rowing.

"I mean, to anyone else, you look like a grown man riding in this ridiculous boat on your own!"

“It’s not quite as silly as I thought. This is actually pretty fun.” I laughed.

We slowly circled the pond. Over the swishing of the boat through the water, Miyagi whistled “Stand by Me.” It was a very peaceful summer afternoon.

Yoshino cherry trees were planted all around the pond. During the spring, there was probably a great view of all of them blooming, with petals falling into the water. And in the winter, the water was probably mostly frozen, the swan boats out of commission and replaced by real swans flying through.

I felt a bit sad realizing I would never again see the spring or winter. But the sight of Miyagi smiling right next to me made me not care about that anymore.

The boat was just the beginning, though. Over the days that followed, I engaged in a series of ridiculous activities. In a way, I did everything you’re not supposed to do by yourself. I was doing them with Miyagi, of course, but it didn’t look that way to anyone else. Riding the Ferris wheel by myself. Going on the merry-go-round by myself. Having a picnic by myself. Visiting the aquarium by myself. Going to the zoo by myself. Swimming at the pool by myself. Going to a bar by myself. Having barbecue by myself. I did everything I could think of that was supposed to be embarrassing for a person to do solo. During each and every activity, I went out of my way to say Miyagi’s name, walk hand in hand with her, look into her eyes, and otherwise indicate her presence to others. When I started to run out of money, I did some daily jobs to earn enough for more activities.

At the time, I didn’t realize I was becoming famous around my little neighborhood. Of course, there were people who laughed at me or tried not to look at me or stared with horror, but others saw my actions as a kind of skilled pantomime or took me as some kind of idealistic performance artist. In fact, some people felt peace or even bliss by watching me. The reactions were quite varied.

What was surprising to me was that the number of those who held a negative opinion of me was not that far off from those who held a positive one.

Why were nearly half of the people watching my foolish activities feeling better? Perhaps the answer was surprisingly simple.

It was because I was truly happy, all the way to my core.

That was probably all it was.

“Is there anything you want me to do for *you*?” Miyagi asked one morning.

“What’s this all about?”

“I just feel like I’m the one being given everything. I like to be on the giving side every now and then.”

“I don’t remember doing anything particularly special. But I’ll think about it,” I said. “What about you? Is there anything you want me to do for you?”

“No, nothing. You’ve done so much already. If there’s any wish I have, it’s to know what *your* wish is.”

“Then my wish is to know your wish.”

“Like I said, my wish is to know what your wish is.”

We went back and forth in this meaningless manner four times, until Miyagi finally gave up.

“You asked me before what I would do if I only had a few months to live, like you. I told you three things, didn’t I?”

“The starry lake, your own grave, your old friend.”

“That’s right.”

“You want to go see your friend?”

She nodded, somewhat apologetically. “If you think about it, I could die any day now, too. So I think it’s probably better if I go to see him now, while I still know where he’s living. And when I say ‘see,’ I mean literally go look at him… Will you come with me?”

“Yes, of course.”

“And you’ll have to tell me your wish someday, too, Mr. Kusunoki.”

“If I think of one.”

We got down to business and looked up the public transit needed to reach our destination, then made preparations to visit Miyagi’s hometown.

On the bus trip through the mountains, she looked wistfully at the landscape through the window and said, “I’m sure I’ll only end up disappointed. My hope is so unrealistic and selfish and childish. Not once have I ever wished for nothing at all to change and had that wish be granted… But even if my wish amounts to nothing, I think I can handle that now. Because you’re right here next to me.”

“There’s nothing that comforts a loser more than the presence of an even bigger loser.”

“That’s not what I meant. Are you just acting foolish?”

“I know, I know. I’m sorry,” I said and caressed her head. “It’s because of this, right?”

“It is,” she agreed.

It was a small town. The kind of place where the electronics store at the shopping district was booming, lines were packed at the smaller

supermarket chain, and students with nowhere else to go gathered at the community center.

No matter where you set your eyes, the scenery was flavorless, but at this moment in time, everything about it was beautiful. I had no need to perceive the world in an efficient way anymore, and no need to blame it for my predicament. I had the wherewithal to view everything for exactly what it was.

When I considered the world without any kind of constraints, it was as vivid and novel as though some translucent film once covering it had been removed.

On this day, Miyagi was the one taking the lead for once. Her childhood friend did live here, apparently, but she didn't know his actual address. She said we'd try all the places he was likely to go. According to her, his name was Enishi.

When we finally found Enishi, Miyagi did not approach him. She sneaked behind my back, carefully popped her head out, then began to take careful steps toward him, until at last she was standing right next to him.

It was at a small train station, the type where you would start feeling cramped with ten other people. Enishi sat on a bench in the corner, reading a book. His height and facial features were perhaps slightly better than average, but the remarkable thing about him was his expression. It was a face of self-assurance, of a person backed by a certain kind of confidence. In recent days, I was starting to understand what went into building that.

I suppose I would say it was the look of a man who loved someone else and knew that he, too, was loved.

It was apparent from his demeanor that Enishi was waiting not for the train, but for someone to get off the train. I didn't want Miyagi to see who that someone was.

I judged the time, then muttered, "Shall we get going now?" but Miyagi shook her head.

"Thank you, but I want to see. I want to know what kind of person he's in love with now."

A two-car train arrived. The majority of its passengers were high school students, but one of them was a pleasant-looking woman in her midtwenties. It was easy to predict she was the person Enishi was waiting for, even before they traded warm looks.

The woman had a very natural smile. In fact, it was so natural that it became unnatural. Most people's smiles always had some element of artifice to them, but Enishi's girlfriend's smile was utterly easy and smooth. Perhaps it was just the end result of a life spent smiling at everything.

The way they met up without even saying a word made it clear that they had been together for a long time, and yet the utter joy on their faces when they saw each other belonged to two people who had been waiting to see each other for the first time. The scene only lasted a few seconds, but it was enough to understand that they were very happy.

Enishi was leading a happy life without Miyagi.

Miyagi didn't cry or laugh. She watched the two without expression. If anything, I was the one who was shocked. In Enishi and his girlfriend, I saw myself and Miyagi. For just a moment, I envisioned a peaceful, happy future that might have been.

A future where I didn't need to die.

They walked away, and only Miyagi and I were left in the building.

"The truth is, I was going to use the fact that they can't see me to do stuff to him," she said. "But then I didn't."

"What kind of stuff?" I asked.

"Like run up and hug him."

"Oh, that? If I were in your position, I'd do even more than that."

"Like what?" Miyagi asked, but before the words were even out of her mouth, I had my arm around her back. And then I did "more than that."

It lasted for about two minutes.

At first, Miyagi was frozen with shock, but over time she began to relax and returned the gesture.

When I pulled away at last, I said, "If no one else is going to tell me off, I'd do something just as selfish."

"…That's right. No one's going to tell you off," Miyagi said at last, face turned downward.

14.

The Blue Period

Change began to take proper shape when my life had less than fifty days remaining.

As I wrote earlier, my boldness in acting like no one was watching (or that *one* person was watching) rubbed many people the wrong way. When I talked happily to an invisible partner, there were more than a few onlookers who whispered in each other's ears, or who yelled awful things I was meant to hear.

Of course, I couldn't complain about that. I was the one who was choosing actions that displeased them.

Three men confronted me at a bar that day. They were the kind of men who spoke loudly and looked for opportunities to make themselves appear strong, carefully choosing when to get aggressive based on the number and size of their opponents. They must have been bored, because when they saw me drinking alone and talking to an empty seat, one sat right next to me and started giving me shit.

Before, I might have been stubborn and said something back, but now I was no longer interested in spending my energy on such things, so I just waited patiently for them to lose interest and move on. But once they understood I wasn't going to argue back, they got more involved and got even more aggressive. I considered leaving the bar, but given how they seemed as if they didn't have anything better to do, I judged they were likely to follow us out.

"This isn't good," Miyagi said, worried for me.

I was just wondering what to do when I heard someone say, "Hey, is that you, Kusunoki?" It was a man's voice. I couldn't think of who would call out to me, so that was startling enough, but it was what he said next that completely stunned both me and Miyagi into silence.

"So you're out with Miyagi again today, then."

I spun around to see who was talking.

The man was not a total stranger. It was my neighbor who lived in the apartment next door. The one who always rolled his eyes when he saw me leaving my apartment and chatting with Miyagi.

If I recalled correctly, his name was Shinbashi.

Shinbashi walked toward me and said to one of the men harassing me, “Pardon me, do you mind if I use that seat?”

His words were polite, but his behavior put heavy pressure on them. The man looked at Shinbashi’s imposing height of over five foot ten and the mean glare that was clearly accustomed to threatening people, and his attitude promptly changed.

Shinbashi sat down next to me and spoke not to me, but to Miyagi. “I hear about you all the time from Kusunoki, but I’ve never actually spoken with you. It’s nice to meet you. My name is Shinbashi.”

Miyagi froze in place, taken aback. But he nodded as though she had said something. “Yes, that’s right. You remember me? I’m honored. We’ve passed by each other a number of times outside the apartment building.”

They weren’t actually having a conversation. It was clear that Shinbashi couldn’t actually see Miyagi.

I suppose he’s pretending to be able to see her for my sake, I thought.

The men who’d been bothering me had lost interest now that Shinbashi was here, and they began to leave. Once the three of them were gone, Shinbashi exhaled and dropped the polite smile he’d been wearing. Now he was back to his usual scowl.

“Let me make this clear,” Shinbashi said. “I don’t actually believe there’s some girl named Miyagi with you.”

“I know. You were rescuing me, weren’t you?” I replied. “I appreciate that. Thank you.”

“Actually, it’s not that, either,” he said, shaking his head.

“Then what is it?”

“I’m sure you’ll never own up to it, but here’s how I see the situation. What you’re doing is a kind of performance art, an attempt to see how many people you can get to embrace the illusion that this girl named Miyagi is real. You’re trying to prove you can affect the perception of others through the act of pantomiming… And your attempt is fairly successful on me.”

“Does that mean you can sense Miyagi’s existence to an extent?”

“I don’t want to admit it, but yes.” Shinbashi shrugged. “And on that topic, I’ve got more than a little interest in the change that’s happening inside me. After everything that you’ve made me sense, I wonder—if I actively accept the existence of this Miyagi, will I actually be able to *see* her?”

“Miyagi,” I said, “is not very tall. She’s pale and on the delicate side. Her eyes are usually cold, but sometimes she’ll give you a little smile. Maybe her eyesight is poor, because when she’s reading small text, she’ll put on a pair of thin-framed glasses, and they look great on her. Her hair’s medium length and has a tendency to curl inward.”

"…I wonder why?" Shinbashi said curiously. "All the features you just described, every last one, match my exact mental image of Miyagi."

"And she's sitting right in front of you. Why do you think that is?"

Shinbashi closed his eyes. "I don't know."

"She wants to shake your hand," I said. "Will you put out your right hand?"

Somewhat skeptically, he extended his arm. Miyagi happily looked at his hand and clasped it with both of hers.

Shinbashi looked at his hand bobbing up and down and said, "This is probably Miyagi shaking my hand, right?"

"That's right. You might think you're doing the shaking, but actually, it's her. She seems really happy about it."

"Will you tell Mr. Shinbashi thank you?" Miyagi asked.

"Miyagi is saying 'Thank you' to you," I relayed.

"I had a feeling that was the case," he said with wonder in his voice. "You're welcome."

After that, with me as the go-between, Miyagi and Shinbashi traded a few words.

Before he returned to his original table, Shinbashi turned back to me and said, "I don't think I'm the only one who senses Miyagi sitting next to you. I think everyone's feeling that sensation initially and telling themselves it's just a stupid illusion. But given the right opportunity—say, the knowledge that they're not alone in that perception—it might actually be possible to have everyone accept Miyagi's presence very quickly. Of course…I have no proof backing me up. But I hope it happens."

Shinbashi's prediction was correct.

It was hard to believe, but after this incident, people around us began to accept the presence and existence of Miyagi.

It didn't mean everyone suddenly believed in the reality of an invisible person, of course. It meant they treated my nonsense as a kind of shared understanding and reacted to me accordingly. Miyagi's existence never became more than theoretical to them, but it was still a major change.

I frequently visited the town's entertainment destinations, high school culture festivals, and summer holiday events, until I became something of a local celebrity. By playing the role of a silly, blissful man, the rest of the town started treating me like a pitiable but amusing kook. Many of them were kind enough to look fondly on me as I held hands and hugged my imaginary girlfriend.

One night, Shinbashi invited Miyagi and me over to his room.

“I’ve got too much alcohol, and I need to finish it off before I go back home to visit… Would you mind helping me with that, you two?”

We went next door, where three of his friends were already busy drinking—one man and two women. Shinbashi had already told the drunks about me, and they began asking me questions about Miyagi. I answered them all, one after the other.

“So Miyagi’s right here with us?” asked a tall girl named Suzumi with heavy makeup as she tipsily brushed Miyagi’s arm. “Oh my God, I kind of feel like she *is*.”

There wouldn’t be any sensation, of course, but maybe there was some inkling of a presence. Miyagi softly held Suzumi’s hand.

The other man, Asakura, was a quick thinker. He asked me a few probing questions about Miyagi, trying to catch me in some kind of contradiction, but the total consistency of my answers tickled his fancy, and after that, he offered his cushion to the spot where Miyagi was sitting and poured a drink, leaving the glass on the floor next to it.

“I like women like that,” Asakura said. “It’s a good thing I can’t see Miyagi. If I could, I’d probably be trying to hit on her.”

“Doesn’t matter either way. Miyagi likes me.”

“Hey, you can’t just make up your own answers,” protested Miyagi. She hit me with her cushion.

Riko, a small girl with a pretty face who was clearly the drunkest of them all, looked up at me from her spot lying on the floor and said sleepily, “Kusunoki, Kusunoki, prove to us just how much you love Miyagi.”

“I’d like to see that, too,” agreed Suzumi. Shinbashi and Asakura looked at me with great expectation.

“Miyagi,” I said.

“Yes?”

She turned to me, her face just a little flushed. I kissed her. The drunks raised a cheer. Even I knew this was a little ridiculous. None of these people actually believed in Miyagi. They just thought of me as some crazy, funny guy to hang out with.

But what was wrong with that?

I became the biggest clown in the neighborhood this summer.

For better or for worse.

A few days after that, on a clear and sunny afternoon, my doorbell rang, and I heard Shinbashi’s voice.

When I opened the door, he tossed something at me. I reached out and caught a car key.

“I’m going back home,” Shinbashi said. “So I’m not going to need that for a while. You can borrow it for the time being. Take Miyagi out to see the ocean or the mountains or something, why don’t ya?”

I thanked him profusely.

As he left, Shinbashi said, “It still doesn’t seem to me like you’re lying. I can’t believe Miyagi’s presence is simply something you’re creating with a convincing pantomime… Maybe there really is some world only you can see. Maybe what we see is only a little part of the full truth of the world. Maybe it’s just the only part we need to be visible.”

And with that, he got on the bus and went back home. I looked up to the sky; the blinding sunlight was the same as ever, but I could sense a hint of autumn in the scent of the air.

The cicadas burst into their screeching song, calling for the end of the summer.

That night, we got into bed together. The boundary between us had vanished by now.

Miyagi faced me in her sleep, breathing quietly and looking as peaceful as a baby. I never got used to the sight of her sleeping face. It was always meaningful, and always dear to me.

I slipped out from under the blanket, careful not to wake her, so I could fill a glass of water in the kitchen to drink. When I came back, I saw that her sketchbook was on the floor in front of the door to the changing room. I picked it up, turned on the light over the sink, and opened it to the first page.

Much more was drawn there than I expected to see.

The waiting room at the station. The restaurant where I met Naruse. The elementary school where the time capsule was buried. My secret base in the woods with Himeno. The room cluttered with a thousand paper cranes. The old library. The carts at the summer festival. The riverbank where we walked the day before I met with Himeno. The observation deck. The community center where we spent the night. The Cub. The candy store. Vending machines. Public payphones. The starry lake. The used bookstore. The swan boat. The Ferris wheel.

My sleeping face.

I turned the page and, for revenge, began to draw Miyagi’s sleeping face instead.

The tired fog was making my head fuzzy, so it wasn’t until I was completely done that I realized I hadn’t drawn something from beginning to end for several years.

I had given up on doing art.

When I saw the finished piece, I was surprised and satisfied, but I also felt something small in the back of my mind nagging at me.

It would have been easy to overlook it. It was a very small feeling, the kind of thing I would easily forget about as soon as I moved on to think about something else. I could have just ignored it, placed the sketchbook near Miyagi's pillow, and gone to sleep, full of happy thoughts about how she might react in the morning.

But I knew.

I focused all my mind, every thought in my brain, to search for the cause of this feeling.

It slipped through my grasp like a bobbing message in a bottle floating in a dark sea.

After most of an hour, when I was ready to give up and pull my hands back out of the water, it suddenly floated right into my grasp by sheer coincidence.

Carefully, so carefully, I pulled it out of the ocean.

And then I understood.

The next moment, I was possessed. I covered the sketchbook in pencil with a single-minded fervor.

It lasted all night.

A few days later, I took Miyagi to go see some fireworks. We walked a path through the rice fields at sunset, crossed the train tracks, passed through the shopping area, and arrived at an elementary school where the event was happening. It was a famous fireworks show in this area, and there were many more stands and carts than I expected to see. The crowd was so large, it made me wonder just how many people lived in the area after all.

When they saw me walking hand in hand with Miyagi, passing children pointed and crowed, "It's Mr. Kusunoki!" The laughter was friendly—kids like crazy people. I lifted the hand holding Miyagi's in response to their jeers.

When we lined up at a yakitori cart, some high schoolers who had heard about me approached and teased, "Your girlfriend's pretty hot." I replied, "Isn't she? You can't have her" and put my hand around Miyagi's shoulder. They cackled and whistled.

This kind of thing pleased me. Whether they believed me or not, everyone enjoyed my little show of saying, "Miyagi is right here with me."

Better an artifice enjoyed than a truth ignored.

There was a PA announcement about the start of the fireworks show, and within a few seconds, the first volley was away.

Orange light spread across the sky. Cheers arose from the crowd, and the bang arrived a split second later, shaking the air itself.

It had been many years since I'd seen a fireworks show up close. It was much bigger and more colorful and more fleeting than I'd envisioned in my head. I'd forgotten how those huge displays of color took only a second or two to spread and vanish, and I'd never thought about how the sound of them bursting hit you in the gut like a punch.

They shot off dozens of fireworks. We lay down on the ground behind the school to watch, where we could be alone. I had a sudden desire to see Miyagi as she was entranced by the spectacle. So I glanced over when a burst of color illuminated the ground and discovered that she was thinking the same thing. Our eyes met.

"We're on the same wavelength," I chuckled. "This happened before. In the bed."

"That's right," said Miyagi, smiling shyly. "But you can always look at my face. You should watch the show while you can."

"That's not necessarily true," I said.

Maybe this was the best time to do it. Nothing like a fireworks display to let the waterworks flow.

"I know I've got another vacation day tomorrow, but I'll be back the day after that. Unlike the last time, this one's just for a single day."

"That's not the issue."

"Then what *is* the issue?"

"…Listen, Miyagi. I've become a little celebrity around the neighborhood. People smile at me—half the time, they're making fun of me, but the other half, they mean it. I don't care why they're smiling at me; I'm proud of that. I can say for certain that there aren't many things that are better."

I lifted myself up and put a hand on the ground so I could look at Miyagi from above.

"When I was in elementary school, there was this guy I hated. He was really smart, but he hid it and played dumb to get other people to like him; I thought he was a prick. But…nowadays, I feel like I get it. The truth is, I was incredibly jealous of him. I think what I really wanted to do was this—to get along with everyone. Thanks to you, I've managed to do that. I've finally reconciled with the rest of the world."

"Well, that's good for you." Miyagi sat up and took the same posture as me. "So…what is it you really want to tell me?"

"I want to thank you for everything," I said. "But I guess I don't really know how to say it."

"You say, 'And I'm looking forward to more,' don't you?" she said. "You still have over a month left. It's a little early for this, don't you think?"

“Look, Miyagi. You said you wanted to know what my wish was. And I promised to tell you once I thought of one.”

She paused for several seconds.

“Yes. If I can help you with it, I’ll do anything.”

“Okay. Then I’ll be direct. Miyagi: When I die, I want you to forget all about me. Everything. That’s my one little wish.”

“No,” she said immediately. But just as quickly, she seemed to recognize my plan.

She had a premonition of what I was going to do tomorrow.

“…Mr. Kusunoki, I know you’re not thinking of what I’m thinking. Please don’t do anything stupid. Please.”

I shook my head. “Think about it. Who could have imagined that a man worth thirty yen would lead such a wonderful end of his life? Nobody would have seen this coming. Nobody would have read the analysis results you looked at, or whatever it was, and envisioned where I am now. I had the worst life imaginable, and look at how happy I am. You don’t know what your future holds, either. Maybe a man with much more to offer you than me will come along and make you happy.”

“He won’t.”

“But I should never have met someone like you, Miyagi. So you could also find—”

“He won’t.”

I couldn’t reply to that, because she knocked me over.

I lay flat on my back, and she buried her face into my chest. “Please…Mr. Kusunoki.”

It was the first time I’d ever heard her cry.

“Please just stay with me for the next month. I’m coming to terms with everything else. I’m coming to terms with the fact that you’re going to die soon, and that I can’t see you on my day off from monitoring, and that other people can’t see us holding hands, and that after you die, I’ve got to keep living on my own for another thirty years. I’m bearing all of it. But please don’t throw away the time we have—these precious few moments we can be together. Please don’t do it.”

I caressed her head, over and over and over, as she sobbed.

We went back home to the apartment and fell asleep in each other’s arms.

The whole time, Miyagi’s tears never stopped flowing.

She left the apartment in the middle of the night.

We hugged again at the front door, until she loosened her grip and pulled away longingly, and gave me a sad, lonely smile.

"Good-bye. You made me very happy."

Then she bowed and turned her back to me.

She walked away slowly under the light of the moon.

The next morning, I went with the substitute monitor to the same old crumbling building. The place where Miyagi and I first met.

There, I sold off thirty days of my remaining life span.

I actually wanted to sell every last day of it, but they didn't do transactions for the last three days, apparently.

When the substitute monitor saw my results, he was startled. "Did you come here knowing that *this* would be the result?"

"Yeah," I said.

The thirtysomething woman who ran my results seemed troubled. "I'll be honest…I don't recommend what you're about to do. At this point, the money itself can't be a major issue, can it? If you spend your last month acquiring proper art supplies and drawing, your name will stay in the art textbooks long into the future. Do you realize that?"

She glanced at the sketchbook I had tucked under my arm.

"Listen carefully. If you go back home without making a transaction, you're going to spend the rest of your thirty-three days drawing like your life depends on it. The entire time, that monitor girl of yours will be at your side, cheering you on. She will never criticize your decision. And after your death, your name will be a part of art history forever. You must be aware of this by now, right? What's your problem…? I just don't understand."

"If money is meaningless after you die, then so is fame."

"Don't you want to be eternal?"

"Eternity means nothing to me in a world where I don't exist anymore," I said.

"The world's most popular art" they'd call it. My work would prompt an explosive debate and ultimately lead to the greatest of honors and recognition.

But now that I'd sold my thirty days, that was just another potential future that would never come to be.

Here's my thinking. Maybe my ability to draw could have bloomed at last if I'd spent an appalling amount of time working at it. And my fate was to

lose that chance to a freak traffic accident or something before the necessary time could accrue.

But by selling my life span and, most importantly, being around Miyagi, the vast expanse of time I would have spent was severely compressed. Somehow my talent was able to blossom in the time just before I died.

That's what I choose to believe.

I was good at art once.

I could re-create what I saw as accurately as a photograph, or dismantle it and rearrange the parts into a completely different image, absolutely naturally, without any kind of training. When I saw paintings in a museum, I could understand with crystal clarity, within some realm of meaning completely separate from language, why things that "shouldn't have been painted that way" actually "*had* to be painted that way."

How I saw things may not have been correct from start to finish. But in any case, I think anyone who knew me at the time recognized that I had an uncanny talent for art.

In the winter of my seventeenth year, I stopped drawing. I felt that if I kept going the way I'd been doing it, I would never be the kind of great and important person I promised Himeno I would be. At best, I might have been an unremarkable artist who did not excel in any particular area. By ordinary people's standards, that might have been successful enough, but to keep my promise, I focused on being as special as it was possible for a person to be. I needed a revolution. I could not allow myself to draw out of mere inertia.

The next time I held a pencil would be when everything had clicked into place. I wouldn't allow myself to draw until I was seeing the world in a different way than any other person. That was my decision.

It wasn't the wrong decision, I think.

But in the summer of my nineteenth year, without having achieved the clarity I sought, I allowed myself to hold the pencil again out of sheer fretfulness. It wasn't until much later that I realized that was the *worst* possible time for me to attempt doing art.

As a result, I lost the ability to draw. I couldn't even sketch a simple apple. The instant I tried to turn something into art, there was indescribable chaos within me, violent, like a scream barely repressed. I was racked with anxiety, as if I was stepping out onto nothing but air. I couldn't feel the necessity of any line, of any color.

I realized my genius was gone, had slipped out of my grasp. And I didn't want to struggle with it any longer. It was too late for me to start all over

again. I threw away my pencils, fled from competition, withdrew into myself.

At some point, I had become too fixated on making my art acceptable to everyone. That was the main source of the chaos, I think. My fatal flaw was the belief that drawing something everyone would enjoy would make it universal and everlasting. In picking up the pencil again when I was most deluded, I was ruined and left "unable" to draw. Universal appeal does not come by obsequiously sucking up to everyone around you so that they like you. It comes from digging to the bottom of your own well and painstakingly dredging up what's down there. It lies within the results of a completely individual and personal approach.

In order to realize this, I needed to draw again without any fixation or purpose, but purely for my *own* personal enjoyment. And it was Miyagi who created that opportunity for me. It was her sleeping face that made it possible for me to draw, in a sense that was completely beyond what I thought it meant to "draw" before.

What I drew over the course of that night was my custom that I had maintained every night since around the age of five, where I drew the imagery in my head before I went to sleep of the world I wanted to live in. Memories that never happened, places I never went, from a time that might have been the past or the future. And by drawing Miyagi's sleeping face, I understood the means to express these concepts that had been building within me. I'd probably been waiting for that moment to arrive. It happened just before I was about to die—but my technique was at last complete.

According to the woman who ran my results, the art I was supposed to create at the end of my lost thirty-day period was "like de Chirico taken to a sentimental extreme." That was her interpretation, but it did sound to me like something I would try to draw.

The value I got for the opportunity to leave my name in art history earned me an eye-popping price. Since it was only thirty days' worth, it wasn't quite enough to pay off all of Miyagi's debt, but she would be free if she worked just another three years.

"Thirty days that are worth more than thirty years." The substitute monitor smirked as we parted ways.

This is how I lost the chance to be eternal.

The "summer in ten years" that Himeno once prophesied was coming to a close at last.

Her prediction was half-wrong.

Here at the end, I was not an eminent figure or a rich man.

Her prediction was half-right.

Something great did indeed happen. As she said, I was glad to be alive, with all my heart and soul.

15.

The Gift of the Magi

It was the first morning of my last three days.

From this point on, there would be no monitor to watch me.

Miyagi was not around anymore.

I'd long ago made up my mind on what to do with these three days. I spent my morning writing in my notebook. When I finished describing yesterday's events, I set down the fountain pen and slept soundly for a few hours. When I woke up, I went outside to smoke, bought an apple cider from the vending machine, and quenched my thirst.

I glanced at my wallet again. One hundred eighty-seven yen. That was it. And sixty of those yen were one-yen coins. I counted three times to be sure: one hundred eighty-seven yen.

When I noticed an odd coincidence, it made me smile. It wasn't much to live on for three days, but the coincidence pleased me.

I looked over my notebook again, adding a few necessary details, then hopped onto my Cub and visited all the places I'd gone with Miyagi, by myself this time.

I rode under the blue skies, seeking something like a whiff of her scent lingering in the air.

Miyagi was out there somewhere now, monitoring someone else. I prayed that this person wouldn't get desperate and attack her. I prayed that her work went according to plan, and when the debt was paid off, she would lead a life so happy that she forgot all about me. I prayed that someone would appear whom she cared about more than me, and who cared about her even more than I did.

I walked through the park, where the children waved at me. On a sudden whim, I decided to pretend Miyagi was there with me.

I held out my hand and said, "C'mon, Miyagi" and squeezed an imaginary hand back.

To everyone else, it would have been the usual sight. "Oh, there goes crazy Kusunoki again, walking with his imaginary girlfriend."

But it was hugely different for me.

Everything about it felt off.

It was my idea to do it, but I felt such a terrible sadness that I could barely stay on my feet.

Miyagi's absence hit me more powerfully than I'd ever felt it before.

It made me think—what if it had all been a hallucination, from the very start?

I was certain my life would end in another three days. I could tell I'd burned down my life force to its last embers. That sensation wasn't a lie.

But had the girl named Miyagi even truly existed? What if her existence—of the whole store that supposedly bought my life span—was all just a delusion that my mind built, to conveniently structure my understanding of the imminent death that my subconscious knew was coming?

There was no way to know now.

I sat on the lip of a fountain and hung my head, until a boy and girl around middle school age spoke to me.

The boy teased, "Are you with Miyagi again today, Mr. Kusunoki?"

"No. Miyagi's gone," I said.

The girl put her hands to her mouth in shock. "Wh-what happened? Did you have a fight?"

"You could say that. I don't recommend it, you two."

The kids looked at each other, then shook their heads. "I don't think we can *never* fight. I mean, even you and Miyagi did, right?"

"If such a close couple can get mad at each other, there's no way *we* can avoid it."

I meant to tell them that was probably true. But the words wouldn't come.

Suddenly, it was as if the cork had been popped loose, and I was crying.

The more I tried to comfort myself by imagining Miyagi next to me, the more the tears flowed forth.

Instead, the two kids sat on either side of me and tried to console me.

Once I had cried all I could and looked up, there were suddenly quite a few people standing around.

Apparently, there were many more people who knew me than I thought.

I was surrounded by a crowd of people of all different generations, apparently here to see what Kusunoki was up to now.

Shinbashi's friends Suzumi and Asakura were among them. Suzumi asked me what happened. I wasn't sure what to say but eventually decided to tell them that I broke up with Miyagi over a fight. She'd gotten sick of me and dumped me, I lied.

“I wonder what Miyagi didn’t like about you?” snapped a teenage girl with a mean glare, incensed at the idea. It was as though, to her, there really had been a girl named Miyagi she was talking about.

“Maybe she had some reason,” said a man next to her. I recognized him. Yes—the owner of the photography place. He was the very first person to accept Miyagi’s existence. “She didn’t seem like someone who would do such a cruel thing.”

“But still, she’s gone now, isn’t she?” said Suzumi.

“If she abandoned such a great guy and vanished, then that Miyagi was never any good,” said a short-haired man who’d been on a run. He patted my shoulder.

I lifted my head to say something, but the words caught in my throat—

—and then I heard another voice behind me.

“That’s right. And he’s such a wonderful guy, too.”

I recognized that voice.

A day or two wasn’t nearly enough to forget it.

I would need three hundred—three thousand—years to erase that voice from my mind.

I turned around to face it.

I knew who it belonged to.

There was no way I could be wrong.

But I couldn’t believe it until I saw her for myself.

There she was, smiling.

“This Miyagi woman is no good, I agree,” said Miyagi, and then her arms were around my neck, hugging me.

“I’m back, Mr. Kusunoki… I was looking for you.”

I returned her embrace automatically, smelling the scent of her hair.

The sensation my body knew as “Miyagi” matched this one perfectly.

It was her. She was here.

I wasn’t the only one who was having difficulty accepting the situation. The other people around us were equally confused.

I was certain they must all be thinking, *Wait, I thought there wasn’t actually a girl named Miyagi?*

It was undeniable, based on their reactions: Miyagi was clearly visible to everyone.

A man in a tracksuit hesitantly asked her, “Um, excuse me, are you Miss Miyagi?”

“That’s right. I’m that no-good Miyagi,” she replied.

The man turned to me, clapped me on the shoulder several times, and said with a laugh, “Good for you, then! Well, I’ll be. She does exist. And she’s quite attractive, to boot. I’m jealous, man!”

But I was still having trouble grasping what was happening.

Why was Miyagi here?

Why were other people able to see her now?

“So Miyagi…really *is* Miyagi,” said the wide-eyed teenage girl next to me. “She’s like… exactly how I imagined her. Exactly the same.”

From the middle of the pack, Asakura tried to get the rest of the crowd to disperse so we could be alone. They trickled away a few at a time, offering congratulations and lighthearted teasing.

I thanked Asakura for his help.

“Just like I thought, she’s exactly my type,” he said with a laugh. “Many blessings to you two.”

And then it was just the two of us.

Miyagi squeezed my hand in an attempt to ease my confusion and explained, “It’s strange, isn’t it? How is it that I’m here, you’re wondering. And how can everyone else see me? The answer is simple… I did the same thing you did.”

“The same thing?”

It took a few seconds for me to understand what she meant.

“How much…did you sell?”

“The same amount as you. All of it. I only have three days left.”

My mind went blank.

“After you sold your life span, the substitute monitor got in touch with me. He told me you’d sold the maximum possible amount of your life and repaid the majority of my debt. By the time he was done describing what had happened, my mind was made up. He handled the transaction for me, too.”

I should be feeling sad about this, I knew.

I’d sacrificed everything to protect her, but she went against my wishes and discarded her own life. It was a lamentable situation.

And yet, I was happy.

Right then, I had never loved anything more than her betrayal and foolishness.

Miyagi sat down next to me, leaned against me, and closed her eyes.

“You’re incredible, Mr. Kusunoki. In just thirty days, you bought back the majority of my life… I’m sorry I turned around and threw away all that time you reclaimed for me. I’m so stupid, aren’t I?”

“No, you’re not stupid,” I said. “If anyone’s stupid, it’s me. I couldn’t even face living three days without you. I was at a loss. I didn’t know what I was going to do.”

She smiled and rubbed her cheek against my shoulder. “Thanks to you, the value of my life had risen a little bit, I suppose. I was able to repay the debt and still had money left over. More than I could possibly spend in three days.”

“So you’re rich, huh?” I teased. I threw my arms around her and rocked her side to side.

“Yes, I’m rich now.” She laughed, hugging me back and making a big show of it.

The tears began to flow down my cheeks again, but it was the same for Miyagi, so I didn’t mind this time.

I’m leaving nothing behind when I die.

Maybe some weirdo or another will remember a fool like me, but I’m guessing the probability is much higher that I’ll just be forgotten.

But I don’t care about that anymore.

I once dreamed of being eternal, but I don’t have to put my hopes in that anymore.

I don’t care if anyone remembers me or not.

Because now I’ve got this girl beside me. This girl and her brilliant smile.

That’s all I needed to be able to release everything.

“Now, Mr. Kusunoki,” Miyagi said, turning to face me and smiling adorably. “How shall we spend the next three days?”

I have a feeling that…

…more than the miserable thirty years I should have spent…

…and more than the meaningful thirty days I should have spent…

…these last three days will be the most precious of them all.

Afterword

There's a saying that "only death cures a fool," but I have a more optimistic look on the subject. I think it should be "A fool will be cured before his death."

Of course, you can't *just* say "fool," because there are many varieties of fool, but when I use the word, I refer to the people who create their own hell. One of the features of such individuals, for example, would be that they are strongly convinced they can never be happy. When their condition worsens, this view expands into "I am not meant to be happy," until they are deluded into the final self-destructive idea: "I do not want to be happy."

At this point, they have nothing to hold them back. They are experts in the means of becoming miserable, and no matter how fortunate their circumstances are, they will always find a way out and skillfully evade any kind of happiness. Because this entire mental process is happening subconsciously, they think everything about the world is hell—but the truth is that they are turning wherever they go into their own personal hell instead.

I can say with authority, as one of those hell-creators myself, that these people are not easily cured. When misery is part of your identity, then not being miserable means not being yourself. The act of self-pity, meant to help you bear your unhappiness, becomes its own form of pleasure, and you will eventually seek out unhappiness so that you can indulge in it.

But as I wrote above, I think these fools are cured before they die. Or to be more precise, I think they find that cure right before death. The lucky ones might have an opportunity to fix themselves before it gets to that point, but even the unlucky ones, when they intuitively sense that their death is unavoidable, when they are finally free of the shackles of the compulsion to go on living—they are at last liberated from this type of foolishness.

I said my view was an optimistic one, but thinking about it again, I suppose you could also say it's quite pessimistic. After all, the moment they finally learn to love the world is the moment they know they are soon to leave it.

But I think that to those people whose foolishness is cured after it's too late for anything else, the world must be such a beautiful place that none of it matters to them. The deeper the regrets and lamentations, such as "I've been living in this exquisite world all this time?" and "But now I finally

know how to accept my life for what it is," the more cruelly alluring it must be.

I've always wanted to write about that kind of beauty. As a matter of fact, I have no intention of expounding upon things like the value of life or the power of love, whether through *Three Days of Happiness* or another book. None.

SUGARU MIAKI

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